

Pepperdine University  
Graduate School of Education and Psychology

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF FAMILIAL FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO A  
POSITIVE COMING OUT PROCESS.

A clinical dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Psychology

by

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September, 2014

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## ABSTRACT

A qualitative study of three families who had a male family member come out as gay was conducted in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the events leading up to coming out, the actual coming out event, and events following coming out. In particular, this study was conducted to gain more information about families that describe an overall positive experience of the coming out process, including common processes and familial characteristics. In total, individual interviews were conducted with seven participants: a brother and sister; a son, mother, and sister; and a son and mother. Interviews explored each individual's recollection of the coming out process and events following the coming out process that were related to addressing a family member's sexuality. Data analysis revealed five prominent themes for all three families: (a) coming out in stages, (b) types of responses to coming out, (c) expressions of acceptance, (d) cultural influences, and (e) exposure to homosexuality. Additionally, one theme, psychological distress, was salient for one family and became evident during the within-family analysis. The themes are discussed in relationship to current research. Clinical implications and implications for future research are also addressed.

## **Chapter I: Introduction**

The concept of identity is multifaceted, and current research has focused on understanding the intersecting nature of one's multiple identities (Stirratt, Meyer, Ouellette & Gara, 2008). Thus, one's identity can never be fully captured through only one dimension. With that in mind, this study will focus on sexual orientation as one facet of identity among gay males.

The primary focus of this study is the disclosure of a sexual minority identity, commonly referred to as "coming out," within the context of one's family of origin. Rust (2003) defines coming out as "the process by which individuals come to recognize that they have romantic or sexual feelings toward members of their own gender, adopt lesbian or gay (or bisexual) identities, and then share these identities with others" (p. 228). The disclosure of one's homosexual identity is considered a difficult decision and process that members of the gay, lesbian, and bisexual community continuously go through. Many theorists and researchers have found that for gay individuals the disclosure of one's sexual identity is a necessary step in the development of a healthy identity (Cass, 1984; Troiden, 1988). Disclosing to one's family is often considered one of the most important and difficult disclosures (Savin-Williams, 2003), and research has focused on the effects of both positive and negative parental reactions to a child's disclosure (Ben-Ari, 1995; D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998; Savin-Williams & Dubé, 1998). Nearly all of this research is done from the perspective of the gay individual, with the age of participants tending to range from 15 to 29 years old (Beals & Peplau, 2006; Elizur & Mintzer, 2001; Elizur & Ziv, 2001; Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995; Holtzen, Kenny, & Mahalik, 1995; Savin-Williams, 1989a, 1989b; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003; Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006). Although the subjective perception of the gay individual is clinically relevant, it is unclear how accurate an individual's perception may be, and the actual experience

of their parents is not as well researched (Baptist & Allen, 2008; Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Ben-Ari, 1995; Fields, 2001; Holtzen & Agresti, 1990; Oswald, 1999; Robinson, Walters, & Skeen, 1989; Saltzburg, 2004). The majority of research has focused on characteristics of the actual disclosure experience, like which parent tends to know, who knows first, and how parents reacted, but the research indicates a need for more longitudinal information (Ben-Ari, 1995; D'Augelli, et al., 1998; D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2005b; Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Savin-Williams & Dubé, 1998). There is a significant dearth in the research on how families experience and manage the disclosure of a child's gay identity over time (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008). The goal of this exploratory case study is to help address this gap in the research by gathering information on how families who have navigated the process successfully reflect on the disclosure experience and how they have attended to the disclosure over time.

### **Purpose of the Investigation**

The purpose of this study is to understand how the family unit experienced the disclosure process and how they managed their gay family member's new identity over time. The hope is that by better understanding the familial dynamics around the disclosure process clinicians will have a better understanding of what to anticipate and address as both gay individuals and their families manage the disclosure. This study intends to focus on families that express a successful navigation of this process. Utilizing a strengths-based perspective, clinicians will be better equipped to understand what familial dynamics can be utilized or may need to be strengthened during this process. The primary question on which this research is based is "How do families successfully navigate the disclosure of a child's gay identity?" It appears that the most effective way to answer that question is to gather information from families that have experienced this process.

By better understanding this process from families that have navigated this experience, clinicians will be better able to understand the effects of the disclosure process on both the individual and familial level, and this will better allow clinicians to understand how strengths can be drawn upon to help clients who are currently in the midst of this process. By focusing on the past, we can better understand how the family has co-constructed their perception of the disclosure process and how each family member's perceptions either align or conflict with those of other family members. By retrospectively looking at the time since disclosure, we can also better understand what the ongoing process is like for families and how they continue to manage and address a family member's gay identity. This will allow for a greater awareness of the needs and strengths of families and further inform treatment and clinical awareness of potential issues and resources.

### **Research Questions**

To address the goal of this study, these research questions were developed to guide the interviews:

Research Question 1: How do the individual members of a family recall and describe the continual process of addressing and integrating a family member's gay identity since disclosure?

Research Question 2: What are common characteristics of families that describe a successful experience of the sexual identity disclosure process and onward?

### **Definition of Terms**

Throughout this study, a number of different terms will be used, some interchangeably, so a short glossary of terms will be provided to help orient the reader. Sexual orientation has been identified as "an individual's enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to

members of the same and/or opposite sex, including lesbian, gay, bisexual and heterosexual (straight) orientations” (GLAAD, 2013). Individuals who identify as gay are indicating their “enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attractions are to people of the same sex” (GLAAD, 2013). The word homosexual also refers to people who are attracted to the same sex. Although this latter term is considered outdated by some organizations (GLAAD, 2013), its use in the following literature review reflects the terms used in each study by the researchers. As the following review of the literature will show, one’s sexual orientation is assumed as part of one’s sexual identity. When considering gay, lesbian, or bisexual individuals, their identity is referred to as a sexual minority identity, which is a contrast to a heterosexual or straight sexual identity.

As noted earlier, the coming out process involves recognizing one’s sexual minority identity and sharing it with others (Rust, 2003). This will also be referred to as identity disclosure, and the two terms will be used interchangeably to both reflect terms used by recent theorists and to avoid monotony.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

Given the focus of this research study, the current literature review includes a review of various models that address the development of a sexual minority identity and its relation to coming out, of the current research on how families influence various health factors for LGBT youth, and of our current knowledge of familial factors and reactions related to the coming out process. Finally, the current literature review explores the influence of sociocultural factors on individuals' beliefs related to homosexuality in order to contextualize the findings of this study. In particular, homophobia and heteronormativity are discussed.

### Identity Models

**Cass's model.** Beginning in the late 1970's, American psychological theorists and researchers became interested in understanding the development of a homosexuality identity, and various models were proposed that attempted to capture the process that occurs as homosexuals begin to formulate their sexual minority identity. These models varied in complexity, but a number of them generated detailed hypotheses about the process of developing a homosexual identity (Cass, 1979; Plummer, 1975; Troiden, 1979; Weinberg, 1978). Given the array of differing theories, this study will focus on the commonly referenced models developed and tested by Cass (1984) and Troiden (1988), while also addressing important developments and variations in more recent theories.

Noting that the majority of models at the time shared important similarities, Cass (1984) distinguishes his model by emphasizing his focus on the interplay between the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of identity. He asserts that one's self-concept is a cognitive construct that comprises various self-images. Cass refers to homosexuality identity as a "typological identity," which is a synthesis of one's self-images and one's view of how others

perceive an aspect of the self, like homosexuality (Cass, 1984). From this perspective, it would seem that a healthy, positive self-image would be the result of a complex interplay between the cognitive and affective appraisals of oneself and of other's views of oneself; consequently, the development of a positive self-concept is co-constructed with others. A detailed review of Cass's model will underscore the importance others play throughout the identity development, specifically, sexual minority identity development.

Employing a cross-sectional design, Cass (1984) tested the following model on 166 subjects (62% male) who completed a Stage Allocation Measure and Homosexual Identity Measure. Utilizing a stage-model, Cass (1984) suggests that the first stage of development is Identity Confusion. In this stage, an individual begins to perceive their feelings, thoughts, or actions as possibly indicative of a homosexual identity. A significant level of distress can arise due to the confusion generated by this discovery. Suggesting that individuals typically maintained a heterosexual self-image prior to this point (Cass, 1984), there appears to be a clash between a previously held heterosexual image and the emergence of a new homosexual image. A distinct level of dissonance arises, and the psychological incompatibility of these two images creates distress and a desire to eliminate that distress (Festinger, 1957). Consistent with this belief, Cass (1984) suggests that individuals can pursue three courses of action at this stage. They can consider the possibility of a homosexual identity, seeing it in either a negative or positive light, or they can reject the possibility, considered identity foreclosure. With identity foreclosure, movement along the stage model has been precluded and ended. For Cass, identity foreclosure can occur at any stage of her model.

The second stage of the model is referred to as Identity Comparison. In this stage, the individual has accepted the possibility of a homosexual identity and is now becoming aware of



the feelings of isolation this generates due to the growing acknowledgement of difference between oneself and non-homosexual people (Cass, 1984). This stage begins to acknowledge the behavioral components of a homosexual identity. Individuals begin to examine whether a potential homosexual self-image or engagement in homosexual behaviors is desirable or not (Cass, 1984). It is unclear if Cass is suggesting that the questioning of one's sexual identity must precede or follow engagement in same-sex behaviors. Given the emphasis on the cognitive aspects of identity, it appears that the self-image of being a homosexual is not contingent on either the presence or absence of same-sex behaviors because these could occur without the conceptualization of them as indicative of a homosexual identity. Cass (1984) notes that individuals may begin to consider the possibility of making contact with other homosexuals in order to alleviate feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Designated Identity Tolerance, the third stage of the model captures the process of interacting with other homosexuals in order to satisfy certain emotional, social, and sexual needs (Cass, 1984). Cass (1984) makes the distinction, though, that this drive is conceptualized as a necessity and not a desire, suggesting that one is tolerating their identity. At this stage, emphasis is placed on social interactions because the appraisal of interactions with other homosexuals as either positive or negative will influence whether one views his/her homosexual identity as desirable or not (Cass, 1984). This supports Cass's conceptualization of homosexual identity as a typological identity. An individual's view of their homosexual identity is heavily influenced by their perception of others' view of it. The search for other homosexuals appears to be a reflection of the desire to reduce the cognitive dissonance that an individual is enduring at this stage in development, and it likely represents the emotional need to connect with others. Cass (1984) notes that an individual may now begin to form and maintain a dual identity: a public

(heterosexual) and a private (homosexual) identity. This likely reflects a negative perception of the views of heterosexual counterparts and the positive perception of the views of other homosexual peers.

The fourth stage of the model, Identity Acceptance, emphasizes the increased contact with homosexual culture and the development of a network of homosexual peers (Cass, 1984). There continues to be a strategy between contextually projecting a heterosexual identity and engaging in the new homosexual identity (Cass, 1984). At this stage though, the process of identity disclosure is hypothesized to occur with non-homosexuals, specifically friends and family, but individuals are carefully chosen in order to limit the possibility of a negative reaction (Cass, 1984). Considering the development of the model to this stage, it seems that individuals are attempting to consolidate a relatively positive self-image concerning their homosexual identity prior to disclosing that identity to others. The current acceptance of that identity appears to have solely been facilitated by interactions with homosexual peers, likely given the anticipation of positive, supportive interactions. Within this model, it is unclear how important, heterosexual individuals could also contribute to this process, and considering that many individuals may not have access to homosexual networks, it would seem that heterosexual support would be necessary to facilitate healthy identity development.

The final two stages, Identity Pride and Identity Synthesis, address how heterosexuals are initially vilified and then integrated into an individual's identity. In Identity Pride, homosexuals develop an intense feeling of pride in their identity, which is coupled with an intense feeling of anger toward heterosexuals, who are viewed as oppressive (Cass, 1984). An individual becomes aware of the marginalized sexual identity they have adopted, and positive interactions with heterosexuals is posited to be necessary in order to progress to the final stage of development

(Cass, 1984). In Identity Synthesis, the split between good homosexuals and bad heterosexuals has dissipated, and an individual is better able to develop an integrated identity, where being homosexual is but one aspect of the self-concept (Cass, 1984). Throughout this model, interactions with others and perceptions of others' views are vital in the development of a healthy identity. Various opportunities arise for developmental arrest to occur as the result of negative interpersonal interactions, so it is important to understand how positive interactions and perceptions facilitate early stages of this model. In particular, does the projection of positive images about homosexuality from one's family facilitate healthy development across this model?

It is important to note that the research on this theory demonstrates general support for this model, but the distinction between stages was not found to be well-defined (Cass, 1984). In particular, stages 1 and 2 and stages 5 and 6 demonstrate lower levels of definition, suggesting that this model could also potentially be conceptualized as 4 stages (Cass, 1984). Attention will now shift to other models of identity development in order to provide a thorough understanding of this concept.

**Troiden's model.** Around the time that Cass (1984) was developing her model of homosexual identity acquisition, Troiden was developing his own theory. Utilizing interviews with gay men, Troiden built his 4-stage model of the development of a sexual minority identity (Troiden, 1979), and this model was later extended to include homosexual women as well (Troiden, 1988). Given the reoccurring theme of interactions with others in Cass's model and the focus of this study, specific attention will be paid to the importance placed upon others in Troiden's model.

Troiden (1979) interviewed 150 white men from New York and Minnesota to discover their experience of realizing and deciding that they were gay. In the first stage, designated

Sensitization, individuals began to accumulate a number of experiences that are later used to interpret their feelings as indicative of a homosexual identity (Troiden, 1979). Troiden (1979) breaks up the Sensitization stage into an early phase and a late phase. It is during this early phase that individuals collect experiences that are later interpreted as reflective of a homosexual identity (Troiden, 1979). Troiden (1979) emphasizes that the hallmark of this stage is the sense of dissimilarity from “conventional” peers. Excerpts from the interviews capture an early general sense of difference between oneself and one’s peers which included differing interests in activities or differing sensibilities, and for most, the origins of the sense of difference were unidentifiable (Troiden, 1979). There is a significant emphasis on a sense of social differences that is not related to same-sex behaviors. Considering that these responses capture experiences prior to age 13, it seems likely that many respondents had not entered puberty, so the emphasis on sexual activity had likely not arisen yet. Troiden (1979) suggests that these early experiences are interpreted as related to a homosexual identity during the late phase of the Sensitization stage. Individuals progress from a general sense of difference to a sense of sexual difference, which is more grounded in emotional and genital experiences rather than social ones (Troiden, 1979). Like Cass (1984), Troiden emphasizes the cognitive aspect of identity because it is the cognitive reappraisal of past experiences that allows them to become integrated into a homosexual identity in the later stages of this theory. Within Troiden’s model, this is a lengthy process that comprises nearly all of adolescence, and this stage is also consistent throughout Troiden’s work, which is not the case for his entire theory.

The second stage of Troiden’s model was renamed from Dissociation and Signification to Identity Confusion (Troiden, 1979, 1988). Troiden (1988) likens this stage to Cass’s (1984) Identify Confusion stage and highlights the process of entertaining the possibility of being

homosexual. It appears that this is the stage where the early experiences of the Sensitization stage are reinterpreted as possibly part of a homosexual identity. Again, there is a sense of dissonance and confusion as the new self-image conflicts with older self-images of heterosexuality (Troiden, 1988). Troiden (1988) also emphasizes that feelings of conflict, guilt, and shame are influenced by the social stigma that exists around homosexuality. Again, it is the appraisal of other's views of homosexuality that heavily influences the cognitive and affective responses to questions about one's sexual identity. Troiden (1988) outlines a number of potential responses that fall under 5 categories: Denial, Repair, Avoidance, Redefinition, and Acceptance. Denial and Repair involve conscious attempts and desires to disavow or eradicate any feelings of homosexuality, while Avoidance is reflective of a desire to ignore those feelings in the hope that they will dissipate (Troiden, 1988). With Redefinition, individuals attempt to define their behavior in a way that still fits into conventional norms, like perceiving things as a phase or experimentation (Troiden, 1988). Finally, in Acceptance, individuals accept the possibility of being gay and begin to seek more information (Troiden, 1988). The factors that contribute to the choice of defensive strategy are of significant clinical importance, and a thorough understanding of family dynamics may provide information about these factors because adolescents would be expected to utilize defenses that would be accepted in the family.

In Identity Assumption, the third phase, the individual has established his homosexual identity and has shared this identity (Troiden, 1988). Like Cass's (1984) model, identity disclosure occurs after the process of examining and accepting one's homosexual identity, but given the fragile subjective perception of this identity, it appears that individuals are susceptible to the actual experience of others' reactions. Troiden (1988) notes that individuals are likely tolerating their identity at this stage, so interactions with others are crucial. Only a minority of

homosexual youth appear to identify as gay without having had direct contact with another homosexual person; for those who have, media representation of homosexuality may play a large role in this process (Troiden, 1988). For gay youths who do self-identify without any contact with other homosexuals, it would seem that they are at a significant risk for high-conflict about their sexual identity given the pervasive social stigma. The micro and macro cultures that they inhabit would have a significant influence on their development. Troiden (1988) underscores this point by noting that individuals at this stage tend to engage in “stigma-management strategies,” which are attempts to avoid the stigma of being gay. These strategies include trying to pass as heterosexual or avoiding all homosexual activity, but they also include becoming involved in the gay community in order to ward off the feelings of isolation (Troiden, 1988).

Finally, individuals progress to the final stage, Commitment. This stage involves adopting homosexuality as a way of life, and it contains both internal and external dimensions (Troiden, 1988). Considered measures of the internal dimensions, gay individuals see same-sex individuals as legitimate partners who are able to provide love and sexual gratification, and they see their homosexual identity as an essential component of their self-image (Troiden, 1988). To measure external dimensions, one looks to see if individuals are able to engage in meaningful sexual relationships with the same sex, and they are also able to disclose their identity to a number of other people (Troiden, 1988). Troiden (1988) notes that disclosing one’s identity is a context-specific process that can have many variations, and it can be contingent upon the perception and actual experience of people’s responses to identity disclosure. Like Cass’s (1984) model, the development of a positive identity is heavily influenced by others, so it becomes crucial to understand how individuals experience and react to this disclosure process.

**Additional models.** Although Cass (1984) and Troiden (1979) are commonly referenced and stand as typical models of sexual minority identity development (Garnets & Kimmel, 1993; 2003; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996), various other models and studies have risen to help clarify the developmental process of sexual minorities. The additional studies that will be reviewed here help provide a deeper understanding of the development of a sexual minority identity.

More than a decade after Cass (1984) and Troiden (1979) began developing and refining their models of sexual minority identity development, McCarn and Fassinger (1996) developed a new model with lesbian identity as its focus, which was validated utilizing a modified Q-sort methodology with 38 lesbians. Fassinger and Miller (1997) then validated this model with 34 gay men, who represented a higher level of diversity than seen in previous models. With their model, McCarn and Fassinger (1996) emphasize the importance of both personal and social aspects of identity, and they note that previous models have confused these reciprocal, yet separate, aspects of sexual minority identity formation. Similar to other stage models, this model includes four phases: Awareness, Exploration, Deepening/Commitment, and Internalization/Synthesis (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). McCarn and Fassinger (1996) consciously use the word phase to connote a greater sense of flexibility and circularity because linear, stage models have been criticized for their implicit suggestion that variation is atypical and a sign of arrest (Rust, 2003). Also, McCarn and Fassinger (1996) emphasize that disclosure is not a sign of developmental progression because the socio-cultural climate and its tolerance of oppression strongly influences an individual's ability to publicly disclose his identity, regardless of his own internal development. This would suggest that an individual's decision to disclose his identity to his family is not only influenced by their own internal development but also by the tolerant or oppressive climate of the household with regards to homosexuality.

Indicating that an individual previously occupies an initial phase of unawareness, McCarn and Fassinger's (1996) four phases capture both an individual and group process. In the Awareness phase, an individual begins to develop an awareness of being different from the heterosexual norm, which often generates feelings of confusion and fear. From the group membership perspective, an individual develops an awareness that other forms of sexual orientation exists and an understanding of heterosexism. In the Exploration phase, an individual explores strong, often erotic, feelings that have developed for another same-sex person, and the individual experiences longing and excitement. From the group perspective, an individual begins to explore their feelings and attitudes about homosexual people and about being a member of that group. Producing both feelings of excitement and anger, individuals begin to grapple with the realities of heterosexism. In the Deepening/Commitment phase, individuals begin to crystallize their feelings about sexuality and intimacy and how it relates to their identity, and from the group perspective, individuals begin to develop an increased commitment to the gay community. Finally, the Internalization/Synthesis phase, individuals internalize their same-sex desire and love as part of their overall identity and develop a sense of pride. From the group perspective, the individual has internalized their identity as a member of the gay community and experiences increased feelings of comfort and fulfillment. Although not a necessity, it is assumed that identity disclosure would likely have occurred by this stage. McCarn and Fassinger (1996) really emphasize the importance of the socio-cultural climate in the development of a sexual minority identity; individuals are wrestling with an emerging identity that challenges the heterosexual norm that exists. It is expected then that the development of one's identity may occur faster and with more ease within an environment that challenges the



heterosexual norm and advances homosexuality as an equally valid identity. This environment could exist at the macro (society) and micro (family and community) levels.

Questions have also been raised concerning the influence of ethnicity on the nature of identity development and achievement. Referencing the basic model of awareness, explorative behaviors, identification, disclosure and development of romantic relationships, Dubé and Savin-Williams (1999) utilized a cross-sectional design to study the effects of ethnicity on the timing and sequence of these developmental milestones amongst 139 Caucasian, African American, Latino, and Asian American youths. They found that some differences exist that may be influenced by ethnicity. Latino youths reported their first awareness to be at a significantly earlier age than their African American and Caucasian counterparts, and Asian American youth reported a mean age of their first sexual encounter that was significantly older than all three other groups, which is a finding that also occurs in heterosexual youth. Addressing the variation in Latino youths' awareness, Dubé and Savin-Williams (1999) suggest that the emphasis on gender roles in Latin culture could explain some of this variation because an individual would be more acutely aware of deviation from gender norms; consequently, a family that emphasizes gender roles and gender normative behavior could affect a child's awareness and acceptance of a gay identity. Not only the timing but also the sequence of events differed significantly in this study. African American youth were significantly more likely to engage in sexual behaviors before identifying as gay, and Asian American youth were significantly more likely to identify as gay before engaging in same-sex behaviors. Although engaging in same-sex behaviors, African American youth appear hesitant to identify as homosexual, suggesting they are experiencing a unique stressor that may have cultural origins.

These additional studies challenge the notion that development occurs in a linear, categorical manner; instead, variation is anticipated and normative. These studies also suggest, though, that socio-cultural factors influence the nature of identity development. Individuals are subject to influences by the attitudes and pressures of their family, community, and society at large; however, families are also subject to these same pressures and influences. More information is needed to understand how families shape and express their understanding and acceptance of variations in sexuality. As the next section will show, families are pivotal in the general health of gay individuals.

### **Parental Influences on the Well-Being of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth**

**Parental influences: Mental health, victimization, and suicide.** This study is particularly interested in the role of the family in the individual's identity construction. The cohesion of the family unit is relevant to the general well-being of sexual minority youth. Bouris et al. (2010) conducted a meta-analysis of the empirical research on parental influences on various facets of gay youth's mental health and well-being, and these studies are outlined to underscore the importance of parents in the lives of gay youth.

Current research has focused on the general mental health of gay youth, which appears to be compromised when compared to non-homosexual youth. Gay youth have been found to have elevated levels of depressive symptoms, reported self-harm behaviors, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts when compared to heterosexual youth (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael., 2009; Remafedi, Farrow, & Deisher, 1991; Russell & Joyner 2001; Safren & Heimberg 1999). Suggesting that past research has overemphasized general distress and ignored actual mental disorders, Mustanski, Garofalo, and Emerson (2010) recently utilized structured interviews to assess for the elevated presence of mental disorders in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and

transgender (LGBT) youth, and they found that LGBT youth met criteria for every DSM diagnosis assessed, particularly Major Depressive Disorder, more often than youth in national samples. Given that their sample included a large number of ethnically-diverse, urban youth, it may be that the intersection of multiple, marginalized statuses contributed to this finding. The occurrence of depressive symptoms, self-harm behaviors, and suicidal ideation has been found to be significantly related to being discriminated against based upon one's sexual minority status (Almeida et al., 2009). These findings suggest that gay youth are vulnerable to experiencing stressors related to their marginalized status that adversely affect their mental health.

Although several studies are limited by their cross-sectional nature and use of convenience samples, important findings have emerged regarding the importance of parental influences on mitigating the disconcerting findings that were just reviewed, but the array of studies reveal that this is a complicated area of research. Considering the impact of parental awareness about a child's sexual minority status, one cross-sectional study that utilized a convenience sample of 542 youth, 74% of whom identified as gay or lesbian, found that youth whose parents are unaware score higher on subscales of the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI) (D'Augelli, 2002). Other studies that also utilized a cross-sectional design with convenience samples, though, have found that parental knowledge does not have a significant effect on BSI scores or self-esteem (D'Augelli et al., 2005b; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Maguen, Floyd, Bakeman, & Armistead, 2002). These conflicting findings are likely a reflection of the differing responses that can occur when a parent learns about a child's sexual minority identity. Even when only one parent is accepting, the youth of parents who are accepting of their sexual orientation score lower on subscales of the BSI and General Severity Index (GSI) than youth whose parents are rejecting of their sexual orientation (D'Augelli, 2002). In another cross-

sectional design with a convenience sample of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth, positive maternal attitudes about a child's gay identity are also positively correlated with self-esteem and negatively correlated with depressive and anxious symptoms as measured on the BSI (Floyd, Stein, Harter, Allison, & Nye, 1999). In the studies that utilized the probability samples of the Add Health study, which has been shown to be nationally representative of a school-based sample, parental support and caring was negatively correlated with depression in homosexual youth (Teasdale & Bradley-Engen, 2010) and secure parental attachment was negatively correlated with psychological distress for both heterosexual and homosexual youth (Ueno, 2005). Although the perception of parental acceptance and support generates mixed findings in terms of its relationship with the presence of psychological distress in LGB youth (Needham & Austin, 2010; Sheets & Mohr, 2009; Savin-Williams, 1989a, 1989b), the perception of parental rejection of one's gay identity is consistently associated with distress and maladjustment (D'Augelli, 2002; D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2006; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009). Youth appear to be highly sensitive and susceptible to the perception of rejection from their parents concerning their sexual orientation.

In a random sample of over 1,000 high school students, Almeida et al. (2009) found that being mistreated due to being perceived as homosexual is significantly related to feelings of distress, self-harm, and suicidal ideation, and parental studies have found that parents can both mitigate and exacerbate these variables. Parental awareness of a child's gay identity allows gay youth to receive support against violence from outsiders, but it also makes them more likely to experience verbal threats and physical abuse from their own families (D'Augelli et al., 1998, 2005a, 2005b). Youth whose parents degradingly referred to them as a "sissy" or "tomboy" reported higher levels of both lifetime and physical victimization than youth whose parents did

not refer to them in that way, and a similar finding occurred for youth whose parents discouraged gender atypical behavior than those who did not (D'Augelli et al., 2006). It appears that parents may have significant difficulty responding to gender atypical behavior in their children. In contrast, youth whose parents provided positive responses to their sexual orientation reported lower levels of lifetime victimization than youth whose parents provided negative responses (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2008). Given that they can also act as perpetrators of violence, parents hold significant importance in the role of creating a safe environment for gay youth.

The findings concerning the influence of parents on suicide attempts by gay youth are also complicated by cross-sectional designs. Youth whose parents were aware of their sexual orientation reported higher percentages of suicide attempts or a higher likelihood of having attempted suicide than those youth whose parents were unaware (D'Augelli et al., 1998; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Rotheram-Borus, Hunter, & Rosario, 1994). Other research, however, suggests that parental knowledge does not have a significant correlation with suicide attempts in gay youth (Hershberger, Pilkington, & D'Augelli, 1997; Remafedi et al., 1991). Given that these studies do not provide information on the timing of attempts in relation to disclosure, it is unclear if parents learn about their child's orientation before or after suicide attempts. The correlation between the nature of the parent-child relationship and suicide attempts is more consistent. Parental support, parental caring, and a sense of family connectedness were indicative of lower rates of suicide attempts, tendencies, and ideation (Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Friedman, Koeske, Silvestre, Korr, & Sites, 2006; Needham & Austin, 2010; Teasdale & Bradley-Engen, 2010). Similar to the other variables discussed here, parental rejection or abuse had significant deleterious effects on gay youth and was associated with youth who had made suicide attempts or engaged in suicidal ideation (D'Augelli,

Hershberger, & Pilkington, 2001; D'Augelli et al., 2005a; Ryan et al., 2009). Across these variables, it is clear that the presence of parental support creates at least modestly mitigating effects and that parental rejection creates at least equally negative effects. It appears clear that parents are needed as allies in the lives of gay youth and that rejecting parents are a significant risk to them.

**Parental influences: Substance use.** The reviewed research indicates that parental support is correlated with less psychological distress (Floyd et al., 1999; Teasdale & Bradley-Engen, 2010; Ueno, 2005), lower levels of lifetime victimization (D'Augelli et al., 2008), lower rates of suicidal ideation, tendencies and attempts (Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Friedman et al., 2006; Needham & Austin, 2010; Teasdale & Bradley-Engen, 2010). This review now explores the potential influence of parents on substance use and abuse in sexual minority youth.

Marshal et al. (2008) recently conducted a meta-analysis of 18 empirical studies that examined the relationship between sexual orientation and adolescent substance use. The meta-analysis found that homosexual adolescents report significantly higher rates of substance use when compared to heterosexual adolescents. For the effect sizes of these findings, sexual orientation and lifetime cigarette use, injection drug use, and composite use (outcome variables operationalized as the use of either one or more illicit substances) were higher than 0.80, which the authors indicate is significant and noteworthy. The authors conflated the overall effect sizes and found the odds of substance use are nearly twice as likely in homosexual adolescents as heterosexual adolescents. The authors note that none of the studies examined the role of mediating variables when assessing the relationship between sexual orientation and substance use. Attempting to understand the relationship between sexual orientation and substance use, one study found a curvilinear relationship between a youth's involvement in gay-related

activities and alcohol and marijuana use (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004). Connecting this immersion into gay-related activities to the coming out process, the authors suggest that substance use could be initially used as a means of mitigating social anxiety, or it could be a reflection of initial attempts at socialization, which may primarily occur at bars. As anxiety naturally decreases or alternative means of socialization are discovered, substance use decreases. It has been shown, though, that the trajectory of substance use begins early for gay youth, and it increases faster and remains higher than heterosexual youth well into young adulthood, challenging the notion that substance use only increases in response to developmental stages (Marshal et al., 2008). Marshal et al. (2008) suggest that chronic stressors may exist for gay youth and that preventative measures could help mitigate this substance use trajectory.

When assessing the potential influence of parents on their gay children's substance use, similar findings occurred as those that were chronicled in relation to psychological well-being, effects of victimization, and suicidal behaviors. Parental knowledge, or lack thereof, of their child's sexual orientation was not related to the use of illicit substances (Padilla, Crisp, & Rew, 2010). With regards to mothers, positive parental reactions to identity disclosure were negatively associated with the odds of using illicit substances (Padilla et al., 2010). A strong parental presence and a sense of parent-family connectedness have been shown to be negatively associated with alcohol and marijuana use (Resnick et al., 1997). This finding likely reflects the positive effects of parental monitoring on reducing adolescent substance use. Parental support has also been shown to moderate the relationship between homophobic teasing and substance use in gay youth (Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008). Examined together, these findings suggest that a constant, stable, supportive parental influence is helpful in reducing the high rates of substance use that have been documented in homosexual youth (Marshal et al., 2008).

Examining the effects of parent-family rejection, Ryan et al. (2009) found that rejection is positively associated with illicit substance use and the presence of substance-related problems. This finding is consistent with other research that indicates familial rejection can produce various deleterious effects on the health and behaviors of sexual minority youth (D'Augelli et al., 2001, 2005a, 2006; D'Augelli, 2002; Ryan et al., 2009).

**Parental influences: Sexual risk behaviors, STI's, and HIV.** Considering that sexual minority youth are differentiated based on their sexual attraction and behaviors, the nature of parental influences in affecting risky sexual behaviors and negative sexual outcomes is of significant importance. Parents have been shown to have positive influences on mitigating the presence of psychological distress (Floyd et al., 1999; Teasdale & Bradley-Engen, 2010; Ueno, 2005), negative effects of victimization (D'Augelli et al., 2008), suicidal ideation, tendencies, and attempt (Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Friedman et al., 2006; Needham & Austin, 2010; Teasdale & Bradley-Engen, 2010;), and substance use (Espelage et al., 2008; Resnick et al., 1997; Padilla et al., 2010). This review now shifts its focus to the potential influence of parents on mitigating the presence of risky sexual behaviors, sexually transmitted infections (STI's) and the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) given the significant risks gay youth face.

The sexual behaviors of gay youth are an area of extreme concern, and various research projects have focused on this topic. In 2009, individuals under the age of 20 made up 5.3% of new, documented HIV infections, and individuals from age 20-24 made up 14.8% of documented cases, which was the highest percentage for any age group in that year (CDC, 2010). For males, 74.8% of infections were contracted through male-to-male sexual contact (CDC, 2010). Gay youth and young adults appear to be at the highest risk for contracting HIV, so it is important to understand what is putting this group at risk. Rosario, Meyer-Bahlburg, Hunter, and



Gwadz (1999) identified several sexual risk behaviors in gay youth. In their urban sample, gay youth were initiating sex at a younger age than heterosexual youth, with the mean age for gay boys being about 14 years. These boys were also having their first sexual encounter with someone who was on average about 6 years older than them. The authors suggest that this pattern leaves young, gay males vulnerable to sexual encounters with a partner who likely has a lengthy history of sexual partners and that young males are not likely to initiate safe sexual practices at such a young age. In fact, youth typically reported utilizing HIV-preventative measures after having their first sexual encounter. Considering that this study also found that gay youth report a significantly higher number of lifetime sexual partners than heterosexual youth, gay youth may be having a disconcerting number of sexual encounters without using safe-sex practices.

Ethnic and cultural differences are also important variables in this topic of research. HIV diagnosis rates have been found to be higher in African American and Hispanic men who have sex with men (MSM; Hall, Byers, Ling, & Espinoza, 2007). Recent numbers show that HIV rates for African Americans are nearly double that of those for white men (CDC, 2010). For gay, ethnic youth, differing predictors of unprotected sex have been identified. African American gay youth's engagement in unprotected sex is significantly correlated with a younger age of initial sexual contact (Warren et al., 2008), which is consistent with risky behaviors identified in urban gay youth (Rosario et al., 1999). For African American gay youth, risky sexual behavior is also significantly associated with being banned from the home due to their sexual orientation (Warren et al., 2008). The authors suggest that this finding is best understood when considering the importance of family and community in African American culture. The parental rejection leaves the gay youth vulnerable to feelings of shame and devoid of the protective parental factors that

will be discussed here. Hispanic gay youth who expressed a higher ethnic identification were also significantly more likely to engage in unprotected sex (Warren et al., 2008). The authors suggest that this may also be understood in the context of traditional Hispanic values, like sexual silence, so that Hispanic individuals who are from families that share traditional values may not be provided with information about safe-sex practices. Given their children's marginalized sexual identity, it is important to consider how well heterosexual parents are prepared for both having and disseminating safe-sex practices in the context of same-sex behaviors. Both parents and their children may be unaware of the high risk situations that gay youth face.

When examining the potential role of parents on sex-related outcomes in gay youth, several findings arose that are consistent with the other parental influences that have been reviewed. A sense of parent-family connectedness has been found to be negatively associated with the odds of being HIV-positive (Garofalo, Mustanski, & Donenberg, 2008). Controlling for sexual orientation, parent-family connectedness has also been found to generally be associated with an older age of sexual debut for adolescents (Resnick et al., 1997). This sense of connectedness may be indicative of parents who exhibit a higher level of monitoring and involvement, which could negatively affect risky sexual behaviors. It appears that mere knowledge of sexual behavior is not a significant influence on sexual practices (O'Donnell et al., 2002); instead, expressed parental disapproval of sexual behaviors is associated with an older age of sexual debut for adolescence (Resnick et al., 1997). This finding is consistent in both heterosexual and homosexual populations, suggesting that adolescents benefit from parental guidance regardless of their sexual orientation (Resnick et al., 1997). When examining the influence of parental disapproval of sexual behaviors on the likelihood of contracting a STI, only female subjects exhibited a negative association (Ford et al., 2005). The variable of sexual

orientation was also controlled for in regards to this finding. It appears that there is a real dearth of information with regard to how parents deal with the sexual behaviors of gay youth. The level of parental comfort with addressing this topic may be compromised with regard to sexual minority offspring, and parents may lack the knowledge to address the specific nuances of same-sex behaviors. Parental support appears to be important for gay youth though because parent-family rejection has been found to be positively associated with the odds of recently having unprotected sex with a casual partner (Ryan et al., 2009). This association echoes the other documented findings that parental rejection is significantly associated with various negative outcomes for gay youth (D'Augelli et al., 2001, 2005a, 2006; D'Augelli, 2002; Ryan et al., 2009).

### **Familial Factors that Influence Sexual Identity Disclosure**

**Individual-level factors.** The reviewed models of sexual minority identity development place differing levels of importance on the disclosure of one's sexual orientation to significant others. In some models, it is seen as an indicator of healthy identity formation (Cass, 1979). Other models, though, suggest that a healthy identity can be formed through an individual process that does not require public disclosure as the benchmark of developmental maturity (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). For those that do decide to disclose their sexual orientation, it appears that disclosing to one's family is one of the most difficult challenges that GLB individuals face (Savin-Williams, 2003).

Several empirical studies have focused on factors that influence an individual's decision to disclose his/her sexuality to the family. In their meta-analysis of the family systems-focused research on disclosure, Heatherington and Lavner (2008) separate these studies into those that focus on individual, dyadic, and familial level variables. Gender is one individual-level variable

that has been extensively studied. There is a consistent trend in the data that suggests gay youth are less likely to disclose their orientation to their fathers, and if they do, fathers are significantly less likely to be told before a youth's mother (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; D'Augelli et al., 1998; Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998). D'Augelli et al. (1998) found that gay youth who disclosed to both parents experienced their fathers' reactions as significantly more negative than those of their mothers. It might seem that this negative reaction is anticipated by sexual minority youth, so they would avoid disclosing their sexuality to their fathers. The same study, though, found that there were no significant differences in the expected responses of parents of youths that had not disclosed their sexual orientation to them; they anticipated that both parents' reactions would be similarly negative. D'Augelli et al. (2005b) found that parental reactions to a child's disclosure did not significantly differ in terms of positivity or negativity, but for boys who had not disclosed their sexuality to either parent, they found that almost three times as many boys said they would never disclose to their father as compared to disclosing to their mother. It is important to understand what aspect of the youth's relationship with his parents engenders this perception of differing responses. The finding that a secure attachment is positively correlated with disclosure could suggest that gay youths perceive greater security with their mothers and fear that their relationships with their fathers are far more tenuous and could not bear the strain disclosure may bring (Holtzen et al., 1995).

Studies have also looked at the role of ethnicity as a predictor for disclosure to families. One study found that the development of a sexual minority identity did not differ across ethnicities, but it found that the likelihood of disclosure for minority ethnic groups was significantly lower than for their Caucasian counterparts (Gro, Bimbi, Nanin, & Parsons, 2006). This is consistent with other research that indicates African American males are less likely than

their Caucasian counterparts to have disclosed their sexual orientation to their parents, especially to their fathers (Maguen, et al., 2002). It appears likely that cultural pressures may be contributing to differences in disclosure rates, but research shows that these are complex factors. Rosario, Schrimshaw and Hunter (2004) found that Latino youths had disclosed to fewer individuals than Caucasian youths but at similar rates as Black youths; however, Latino youths reported similar levels of comfort with others knowing about their sexuality as Caucasian youths had, and these levels exceeded the level of comfort of Black youths. The authors speculate that various cultural values could be interacting for Latino youths. In Latino culture, *Familismo* emphasizes the importance of family interdependence and places family harmony over the individuation needs of any one member (Falicov, 2005). Considering the potential stress that disclosure creates, it would seem that gay, Latino youths may be reticent to disrupt the family system. A qualitative study of the disclosure process for various ethnic groups revealed similar themes (Merighi & Grimes, 2000). One Mexican-American respondent disclosed how family loyalty acted as a barrier to disclosure because he feared the shame it might bring upon his family from outsiders. Another Mexican-American respondent, though, articulated how his sense of family unity was comforting as he believed that his family would always support him. These varying views of the same cultural value illuminate the complexity of the disclosure process for certain cultural groups.

Studies have also focused on the role of religion and its influence on the disclosure process. In one study, males from families with highly traditional values perceived their family's attitudes as more negative than males from families with less traditional values (Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993). The concept of traditional values is crucial in this study. Newman and Muzzonigro (1993) operationalized families with high traditional values as those that indicated

the importance of religion to the family, the importance of getting married and having children to the children, and the presence of another language other than English being spoken in the home. It would seem that the additional criterion of non-English speaking families creates an additive variable of cultural values that might influence the findings of this study, but the study found that traditional values alone surpassed the effect of race. This is also consistent with other findings that demonstrate a significant difference in disclosure for gay men with religious parents (Schope, 2002). It is likely that traditional religious values convey a sense of intolerance of homosexuality, which has influenced the decision to disclose one's sexuality.

**Dyadic-level factors.** The descriptive data found in studies that focused on individual-level factors revealed important findings: such as gay youth tend to disclose less to their fathers, and when they do, they experience their reaction as more negative than their mothers' reactions (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; D'Augelli et al., 1998). These findings, though, do not provide information about the underlying dynamics that contribute to these differences. Research has moved toward better understanding the nature of these contributing factors and has shifted its focus to dyadic relationships within the family.

Consistent with past findings, Savin-Williams and Ream (2003) found that gay and lesbian youth tend to disclose their sexual minority identity more often to only their mothers and tend to disclose their identity to their mothers before their fathers. This study, though, provides information on the motivation for either disclosing or not disclosing their identity to their parents. For both gay and lesbian youth, the motivation for disclosing to their mothers was largely influenced by the elevated level of closeness they experienced with their mothers as compared to their fathers. In fact, the mothers of about one-third of this sample inquired about their children's sexuality. Given the close nature of their relationship, it may be that a substantial

level of security and trust is facilitating youths' disclosure. This is a stark contrast to the sample's fathers, who tended to learn accidentally or by being told by someone other than their child. This study does not provide information on who disclosed the youths' identity to their fathers, but this information is crucial in understanding the complex dynamics within a family. Youths may be eliciting the support of other family members to disclose their status to their fathers, which would underscore the perceived tenuous nature of the father-child relationship. Compared to lesbian daughters, gay sons were significantly more likely to disclose their status to their fathers in the hopes of eliciting support and becoming closer. Although they may perceive a tenuous relationship with their fathers, gay sons appear to maintain hope in improving the quality of those relationships. Beals and Peplau (2006) also found that gay and lesbian individuals were more likely to have disclosed their sexual identity to mothers than fathers, and they also found that they were more likely to disclose to sisters than brothers. This sample also reported having better relationships with individuals they had disclosed their identity to rather than with those who they had not. It is unclear if the sample disclosed to individuals who they already felt close to or if the act of disclosing improved the quality of their relationship. It could understandably be a combination of both of those processes. The quality of relationships, though, was captured on a 7-point Likert scale that ranged from "very poor" to "very good." Although this allows for a quantified perception of the sample's relationships, it does not capture the varied nuances of their relationships. More information is needed to understand what contributes to the perception of a relationship as either good or poor.

To improve upon the conceptualization of the parent-child relationship, studies have focused on the attachment style within these relationships. A child's attachment style with his caregivers has been theorized to play a pivotal role in the development of the child's stable sense

of self and in his internal working models of the outside world (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1969, 1973). Applying this concept to gay youth, individuals with a secure attachment with their parents may feel safer disclosing their sexual identity. Savin-Williams and Ream (2003) found that gay youth are motivated by their level of closeness with their mothers to disclose their identity to them. This sense of closeness may be reflective of a secure attachment style.

Quantifying the child's perception of their attachment with their parents, one study found that disclosure of one's sexual identity and the length of time since disclosure is positively correlated with a secure attachment style (Holtzen et al., 1995). Though correlative research does not allow for causal statements, it can be inferred that gay individuals are more likely to disclose their status due to a secure attachment style. Given the additional data concerning the length of time since disclosure, though, it can also be inferred that disclosing one's sexual identity can contribute to perceptions of a secure attachment style. In a retrospective study, Miller and Boon (1999) examined how a sense of trust and confidence in mothers changes in gay and bisexual men who disclose their sexuality to them. Asked to draw longitudinal trust curves, the men in this sample illustrated how they associate the act of disclosing with changes in their levels of trust in their mothers (Miller & Boon, 1999). The majority of respondents depicted either no change or an increase in trust immediately following disclosure (Miller & Boon, 1999).

Interestingly, the data did not suggest that a high sense of trust or confidence prompted disclosure, which the researchers expected (Miller & Boon, 1999). Noting a relatively stable trajectory of trust since disclosure, the authors caution that time may have attenuated memories of volatility in the mothers-son relationship (Miller & Boon, 1999). Like many of the studies in this area, this research is hampered by the lack of data from the individuals' parents. The



parents' perception of their child's attachment style would provide critical information about the dyadic relationship.

In their study, Mohr and Fassinger (2003) developed a conceptual framework for LGB individuals that suggested indirect links exist between a gay individual's childhood attachment representations and a negative sexual identity and degree of public disclosure of sexual identity. This indirect effect was hypothesized to occur through the mediating factors of the individual's perception of their parents' support of their sexual orientation and through their general attachment style, specifically avoidant and anxious attachment styles. This study found that those who maintained a negative sexual identity were more likely to exhibit highly avoidant and anxious attachment styles than those who had a better integrated sexual identity. Deemed a fearful attachment style, the combined style of elevated avoidance and anxiety has been found in individuals who maintain a negative self-concept and a negative concept of others (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). Given that avoidant behavior was also inversely associated with level of outness (Mohr & Fassinger, 2003), it appears that insecure attachment styles play a significant role in the ability for gay individuals to successfully integrate their sexual identity and feel secure in their ability to disclose that identity to others without negative repercussions. Mohr and Fassinger (2003) also found significant support for their hypothesis that perceptions of a caregiver's availability and sensitivity during childhood were indirectly related to a gay individual's sexual identity integration and public outness. This indirect effect was mediated by the perception of a parent's support for the gay individual's sexual orientation, which had a direct effect both on an individual's attachment style and an individual's sexual identity and outness. There appears to be a rich interplay between gay individuals' longstanding attachment styles with their parents and their relationship with their own sexuality. Parents appear to play a

significant role in their gay children's' ability to formulate a healthy sexual identity. Given the median age of this sample was 36 years, this effect continues well beyond youth and adolescence. Interestingly, it was only the father's support that directly affected the sample's negative sexual identity and level of public outness. The authors suggest this discrepancy may be reflective of the parents' differing roles within the family dynamics with regard to a child's LGB sexual orientation. The nature of these differing contributions, though, has not been examined, so the need exists to understand how these dyadic differences coalesce within the context of the family system.

**Family-level factors.** The research that has been produced and reviewed here has provided important information concerning the coming out process for gay individuals to their families. Descriptive data has been collected that indicates gay individuals, specifically youth, are less likely to disclose their sexual identity to their fathers and that they are motivated to disclose to their mothers due to the increased levels of closeness they perceive in their maternal relationships (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). Sensing the discrepancy in their respective relationships with their parents, gay youth may be motivated to improve their relationships with their fathers and elicit support by disclosing their sexual identity (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). Of course, the support of both parents is beneficial for gay youth. Positive parental attitudes about a child's gay sexual orientation are significantly related to the youth's sense of closeness with their parents, which is significantly related to positive self-esteem in the youth (Floyd et al., 1999). This past research, though, does not capture the rich and complex dynamics that occur within the family as it attends to and processes the gay family member's disclosure. Accordingly, other studies have focused on better understanding family processes that facilitate the disclosure process.

In their meta-analysis of studies that focus on familial dynamics, Heatherington and Lavner (2008) indicate that family cohesion has been one of the most researched variables in regards to the disclosure process, but this variable facilitates varying outcomes. Waldner and Magruder (1999) generated a model to understand how family relations affect a gay youth's perception of social support of their identity, their disclosure status to parents, and their identity expression, which was operationalized as participation in gay and lesbian organizations and frequency of sexual activity. In this sample, positive family relations were significantly related to lowered perceptions of social support and identity expression, and positive relations were not a significant predictor of identity disclosure to parents. The authors suggests that positive family relations may make the disclosure process even more costly for the gay family member, who may perceive greater risk in disclosing their identity and disrupting the family system. Given the positive family relations, gay individuals may not be as motivated to seek support for their sexual orientation or may find it threatening to the family system, which could explain why they maintain lower perceptions of social support in this sample. This study generates various questions concerning the psychological welfare of the gay family member and the family unit. It would be clinically relevant to understand how the family and the gay member collude with each other to maintain low identity expression as a means of maintaining the family balance.

When a gay family member has disclosed his status, research underscores the importance that family support, particularly family acceptance of sexual orientation, has in the lives of gay individuals (Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995; Elizur & Mintzer, 2001; Elizur & Ziv, 2001). When coupled with the concept of self-acceptance, family support (a combination of family acceptance of sexual orientation and general family reaction concerning disclosure) has been shown to buffer the effects of harassment and victimization on a gay individual's mental health

(Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995). Being operationalized as level of self-esteem and comfort with one's sexuality, high self-acceptance could also be reflective of healthy, positive family dynamics. A positive self-concept and concept of others have been linked to a secure attachment style (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994), which has been shown to originate from experiences with one's caregiver (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1969, 1973). Furthermore, a secure attachment style has been shown to be correlated with higher rates of disclosure to the family (Holtzen et al., 1995). Although the data cannot provide an explicit rationale, Hershberger and D'Augelli's (1995) findings concerning good mental health in gay youth may be reflective of the complex interplay between the individual and the family.

Studies have also focused on examining the effects of both general family support and family acceptance of one's homosexual orientation (Elizur & Mintzer, 2001; Elizur & Ziv, 2001). The positive effects of family support on psychological adjustment were partially mediated by family acceptance, and the positive effects of family support on identity formation were wholly mediated by family acceptance (Elizur & Ziv, 2001). It appears that gay individuals require specific support and acceptance concerning their sexual orientation that exceeds general social support from their families. The importance of this support is reflected in the influence it has on the sample's ability to recognize and integrate their sexuality into their identity. Elizur and Mintzer (2001) found that family acceptance of sexual orientation also mediated the effects of general family support on the disclosure process. The authors suggest that generally supportive families are more inclined to adopt positive, accepting attitudes toward a child's gay identity and that these accepting attitudes foster disclosure. Given that the samples in these studies consisted solely of Israeli men, it is important to consider whether the strength of these findings are influenced by the varying level of importance placed on family approval in Israeli

culture. Elizur and Mintzer (2001) suggest that the power of family processes is likely influenced by the importance placed upon the family of origin, which varies in different cultural contexts.

Family closeness and acceptance are not the only variables that have been studied. Willoughby, Malik, and Lindahl (2006) examined the role of family adaptability and cohesion in the disclosure process. Individuals who rated their families as higher in either adaptability or cohesion prior to disclosure were significantly more likely to perceive their parents' initial reactions to disclosure as less negative than those who rated their families lower in adaptability or cohesion. These authors discuss the importance of family stress theory in understanding these findings. The family stress theory suggests that families maintain resources that are utilized in the face of stressors or crises and mitigate negative consequences, and cohesion and adaptability have been widely studied in this theory (McKenry & Price, 2000). The disclosure process acts as a stressor that affects the entire family unit, and it appears a familial sense of unity and flexibility can help facilitate more positive parental responses. It is unclear, though, if these familial attributes continue to facilitate healthy family dynamics and outcomes after the disclosure process. Positive family relations have been shown to be a threat to identity expression (Waldner & Magruder, 1999). Although a cohesive family may initially respond more positively to disclosure, a cohesive family may covertly work to maintain the same family dynamics prior to disclosure. It may take a combination of cohesion and adaptability to respond successfully to integrating a gay family member's identity. There may also be other familial attributes or processes that are pivotal to this process.

## **Familial Reactions to Disclosure**

The focus of this study is to understand how families successfully navigate the disclosure process because of the family's importance in the physical and emotional well-being of gay youth. It is important to understand what the current research does know about how families describe their reaction to the disclosure event. Researchers have proposed models that help capture the potential processes.

**DeVine's model.** Utilizing a family-systems perspective to develop his stage-model, DeVine (1984) first articulates that the disclosure events should first be seen as a crisis for the family for a number of reasons. He notes that for the family system there is likely a lack of rules in terms of how to handle the disclosure, a lack of roles in the family specific to being homosexual that members can fit, a lack of constructive language to describe the issue, the presence of strong negative family and cultural prohibitions about homosexuality, and the presence of various powerful family traits and dynamics that work against integrating the new role into the family (DeVine, 1984). These systemic traits and factors include cohesion, the regulative structure, and family themes (DeVine, 1984). Cohesion is the level of emotional bonding within the family, and it exists on a continuum that ranges from enmeshed to disengaged (DeVine, 1984). The regulative structure refers to explicit and implicit rules and role expectations of the family, and the degree of maintenance of these rules and roles can range from rigid to chaotic (DeVine, 1984). Faced with a novel situation, families may default to previous conflict-resolution strategies (Strommen, 1989). The focus of family themes is the relationship of the family and its image with outside environments, so the family will negotiate internal decisions based upon these themes (DeVine, 1984). A family that believes it can solve all its

own problems would likely discourage outside help and may subtly, or overtly, place pressure on a gay family member to not seek outside support.

DeVine (1984) describes five stages that the family system typically experience concerning the disclosure event, and he notes that the first three stages are predominantly marked by systemic forms of denial. First, parents may have experienced a *subliminal awareness* where they maintain some vague suspicions about their child's sexuality, likely due to atypical gender behavior (DeVine, 1984). DeVine (1984) relates that the family system will engage in an array of behaviors that is meant to maintain homeostasis within the family, and members are not likely to seek positive confirmation of any suspicions. This idea was confirmed in studies that focused on parents' reports of their experience of the disclosure process, and parents describe vacillating between worrying and avoiding their suspicions (Robinson et al., 1989; Saltzburg, 2004). Considering that greater childhood gender atypicality has been shown to be significantly correlated with parental awareness of a child's homosexuality (D'Augelli et al., 2005b), it may be more difficult, if not impossible, for families whose child displays high levels of gender atypicality to deny their child's sexuality. DeVine (1984) suggests that a child's disclosure may not occur for years in families that are enmeshed and rigid. It appears that families that are both extremely cohesive and very strict in their family roles likely convey the message that disclosure would be unacceptable. This helps explain findings that indicate positive family relations are associated with less sexual identity expression (Waldner & Magruder, 1999). It may be that a family that is high in cohesiveness but more flexible in their roles would be more encouraging and receptive to a child's disclosure. Interestingly, DeVine (1984) notes that disengaged, chaotic families are also less likely to experience the disclosure process because the gay family member does not experience the same tension around hiding their sexuality. Suggestive of a curvilinear

effect, levels of familial cohesion and role flexibility appear important in understanding what facilitates or inhibits disclosure.

Next, parents experience the *impact* of the disclosure (DeVine, 1984). Described as a crisis, families experience an array of emotions that are analogous to the ones described by Kubler-Ross (1969). It is suggested that families first experience Denial and Isolation as they initially attempt deny or dismiss the truth of their child's sexuality (Savin-Williams & Dubé, 1998). DeVine (1984) suggests this occurs as families experience a sense of loss of control. Parental reports reveal that panic and sadness can occur as parents are faced with the loss of their idealized dreams for their child (Hom, 2003; Saltzburg, 2004). In response to this panic and loss, families may clamor to regain control through active denial (DeVine, 1984). Parents may see their child as confused or merely navigating a transient phase, and they may look to past behavior that is incongruent with the child's disclosure of homosexuality (DeVine, 1984; Savin-Williams & Dubé, 1998). The family may also be experiencing feelings of isolation from others as they struggle to process the disclosure, and these feelings are exacerbated when the family is not acquainted with other families that have a gay member (Saltzburg, 2004; Savin-Williams & Dubé, 1998). Experiencing intense feelings of loss, sadness, and loneliness, the family may then experience anger, either toward their child, leading to rejection or abuse, or toward an imagined external cause (Savin-Williams & Dubé, 1998). With an array of emotions swirling, it is suggested that confusion is the salient feeling for families at this time (DeVine, 1984). Consistent with this idea, one of the few studies to include the actual perceptions of parents found that shock was the most common reaction to disclosure (Ben-Ari, 1995).

Like the grieving process, parents may then engage in Bargaining, which includes hoping for their child's conversion or asking their child to limit their disclosure to others (Savin-



Williams & Dubé, 1998). DeVine (1984) describes this as the *adjustment* phase. Families may first look to see if the sexual orientation is changeable, and when it becomes clear that is not possible, families will likely attempt to elicit concessions in terms of whom outside the family can know (DeVine, 1984). DeVine (1984) suggests that families are attempting to manage the impact of the crisis by keeping their child's sexuality a secret, and a rule of not discussing one's homosexuality can create boundaries with people outside and within the family. The focus of the family is on actions, not feelings, so if the gay family member capitulates to the family's terms, a false sense of resolution will be induced (DeVine, 1984). Reports from parents suggest that an affective detachment occurs as they try to reconcile the internalized homophobic messages they hold with the loving image they have of their child (Saltzburg, 2004). Saltzburg (2004) suggests that the intense conflict can become overwhelming, so parents affectively retreat in order to manage these feelings; accordingly, they become concrete and solution-focused as a means of coping.

In the Depression stage, parents may be attempting to manage both feelings of shame about what others may think and fears of what life will entail for their marginalized child (Savin-Williams & Dubé, 1998). Fears could include that their child will be alone for the rest of their life or that they will face discrimination by others (Savin-Williams & Dubé, 1998). Studies also indicated that many parents reported fears about their children contracting AIDS, and the writers note this fear was likely influenced by the cultural context of the AIDS epidemic (Ben-Ari, 1995; Robinson et al., 1989). These fears highlight the importance of the cultural norms around heterosexuality and expectations of a heterosexual child. In his *resolution* stage, DeVine (1984) suggests that families are beginning the mourning of the implicit dream they held to have a heterosexual child, who would marry and provide grandchildren. Parental reports have shown

that parents can compare learning about their child's homosexuality to experiencing the death of a child (Hom, 2003; Robinson et al., 1989; Saltzburg, 2004). DeVine (1984) suggests that families are now faced with the difficult task of adjusting their rules, roles, and expectations. It would appear that families that are emotionally invested in each other and flexible in their cognitions would be able to successfully navigate this difficult task. It is at this stage that families begin to evaluate and challenge their heteronormative assumptions and homophobic beliefs (DeVine, 1984). It would be important to contextualize each family within a socio-cultural frame in order to understand the particular beliefs that they hold about homosexuality.

At the Acceptance stage, parents have largely concluded the mourning process and are more comfortable in discussing their child's sexuality with others (Savin-Williams & Dubé, 1998). Attempting to achieve *integration*, DeVine (1984) adds that families have developed a deeper awareness of what it means to be gay as they have challenged their own myths and confronted their own expectations. Some parents describe navigating this process by meeting other gay people or reaching out to parents of gay children (Saltzburg, 2004).

**Social-cognitive-behavioral model.** Drawing on the current research at the time, an alternative model was proposed that focused on the interaction between intrapersonal factors, individual behaviors, and environmental factors and how they relate to familial reactions to a gay member's identity disclosure (Crosbie-Burnett, Foster, Murray, & Bowen, 1996). The authors propose this social-cognitive-behavioral model to "illustrate how family members relate to each other cognitively and behaviorally within their shared social and physical environment and within the family's social environments" (Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996, p. 397). They suggest that their model represents a sequential process of adjustment but caution that the true process could occur in different stages (Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996).

Within families, there may first be an *incremental disclosure* (Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996). The family member who is the first to know can be placed in a precarious position as he/she may be expected to keep the family member's secret or to disclose this information to the rest of the family, or the family member may be uncertain of what the discloser's desires or expectations are (Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996). If this is the case, a secret has been introduced into the family, and a subgroup is inherently created, comprised of the discloser and secret-holder, and this dynamic can generate feelings of anxiety and confusion (Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996). In this model, a belief that other family members cannot know generates feelings of anxiety that lead to secret-keeping behaviors within the family environment that threaten the family's cohesion (Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996).

As disclosure occurs, the next step of *adjusting to the new role of parent or sibling of a gay or lesbian* occurs. Like DeVine (1984's) who discusses subliminal awareness, Crosbie-Burnett et al. (1996) state that family members may suspect that their child/sibling is gay prior to disclosure, so they may have already begun to explore and process this possibility, leading to a shift in their cognitive schema about the family. Conversely, denial may occur at this stage, suggesting no change in the cognitive schema (Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996). Similarly, family members may respond to the coming out process with accepting or rejecting behaviors, which again indicate flexibility or rigidity in cognitive schemas, respectively (Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996). Crosbie-Burnett et al. (1996) suggest that families are immediately faced with the question of why their family member is gay. The beliefs and attributions about this may significantly influence behaviors and responses as family members that believe homosexuality is genetic are more likely to respond in an accepting, understanding manner than family members that believe homosexuality is a choice (Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996; Strommen, 1989). The

sources of these beliefs and values are both familial and social (Strommen, 1989). For families today, mainstream attitudes about homosexuality may highly influence beliefs about homosexuality, but of course, various cultural considerations, like religiosity, must be considered. This cultural component is underscored by the emphasis that Crosbie-Burnett et al. (1996) place on families adjustment to their child/sibling potentially having HIV/AIDS, which is a concern that is documented by other studies at the time (Robinson et al., 1989). It would be important to learn if this is still a concern for families and to discover what pressing concerns for families are now.

According to Crosbie-Burnett et al. (1996), families are also faced with the various implications of the gay member's disclosure. Families can be confronted with their expectation that their child would grow up heterosexual, marry an opposite-sex individual, and have children; consequently, families are faced with the loss of these expectations (Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996). Family members may begin to experience feelings of anger or a loss of control, and these feelings may be related to perceptions of the social environment as families begin to recognize their new, marginalized status in society (Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996). Similar to the issues that are raised in incremental disclosure, families are faced with the decision of keeping their family member's identity a secret or disclosing it to others, who also may prove rejecting or disapproving (Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996). Again, perceptions or beliefs about others will influence the emotional climate of the family and heavily influence their behaviors. Succinctly capturing the complex interplay between various emotions, Crosbie-Burnett et al. (1996) assert, "A resolution of the potential intrapersonal conflict between personal feelings like pride and protectiveness of one's child or sibling, anger, guilt, and the fear of being vulnerable to society's

homophobic sanctions is a part of the adjustment” (p. 400). As this process begins to unfold, families are now faced with *coming out as a family member* (Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996).

Within this model, there is also considerable interest about the effects of disclosure on the various subsystems of the family (Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996). Considering the gay child-parent subsystem, disclosure could increase feelings of closeness if the relationship was already experienced as emotionally close, or disclosure could lead to further strain in a parent-child relationship that was already emotionally distanced (Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996). Of course, disclosure could lead to increased feelings of closeness and trust despite the previous nature of the relationship (Miller & Boon, 1999). Within the straight child-parent subsystem, either parent or child could be helping the other adjust to the disclosure, and this process may even increase the closeness of this parent-child system (Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996). Crosbie-Burnett et al. (1996) caution that the marital subsystem’s cohesion can be challenged if one parent is unaware of a child’s homosexuality, which can be common (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003), or if only one parent is accepting. The sibling subsystem bears similarities as one sibling may be more accepting than another, and siblings may feel protective of their gay sibling or may also be rejecting (Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996). It is clear that individual responses, influenced by intrapersonal factors, can significantly affect various subsystems in the family and, ultimately, the response of the family system. This model thus provides important areas to be researched when addressing the familial response to coming out.

**Qualitative studies of familial reactions.** As it has been shown, several studies exist that document a gay individual’s experience of the coming out process and his perspective of his family’s reaction to disclosure. Research has now begun to shift toward understanding the lived

experience of family members who have navigated the coming out process. This review will now detail what is currently known about these particular narratives.

Individually interviewing each family member from four different families, Beeler and DiProva (1999) utilized a qualitative approach to better understand how family members describe the process of coming to terms with a family member's disclosure of being gay or lesbian. All four families were Caucasian and middle class, and time since disclosure ranged from about one year to ten years. Utilizing an unstructured interview, Beeler and DiProva (1999) prompted each family member to discuss learning that a family member was gay, and the researchers focuses on active efforts that were made to accommodate learning about the family member's sexuality. Twelve themes were gleaned from these interviews.

At a very fundamental level, families are *establishing rules for discussing homosexuality* (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). Families described concerns about what can be asked and about what opinions can be expressed that will not cause the gay family member to feel unsupported; conversely, one brother disclosed how he is not comfortable discussing the details of his brother's sex life regardless of his sexuality, though it is unclear what the meaning of that is for the gay brother (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). Described by the authors as a potentially "subtle and ongoing process" (p. 447-448), developing boundaries around acceptable topics can also include what words are acceptable to use, like queer, and this appears heavily mediated by the perception of a family member as supportive or unsupportive (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). Likely related to confusion and the lack of rules for this familial event (DeVine, 1984), the family's fear and uncertainty seem exacerbated by the subtle nature of establishing these rules. If families were able to directly express their concerns and feelings, this may become a smoother, more adaptive,

process. In a study that focused on the experience of lesbian and bisexual women, their families' willingness to discuss their sexual identity was experienced as very supportive (Oswald, 1999).

A number of themes emerged that appeared to reflect the potential processes that families go through to accept and integrate a gay member's identity. Nearly all of the subjects were found to be *seeking information about homosexuality and the gay community*, and this was often explicit and planned, as evidenced by buying books about homosexuality, attending Parents and Friends of Lesbian and Gays (PFLAG) meetings, or approaching gay and lesbian friends for information (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). This suggests that most of the participants did not feel adequately prepared to have a gay family member or knowledgeable about homosexuality. Becoming more aware of homosexuality may lead to the next theme of *second-guessing the sexuality of others* as family members begin to challenge their initial assumption that people are heterosexual, and this discussion appears to even concern other family members (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). This appears to reflect a significant shift in thinking which would suggest a good level of cognitive openness and flexibility. Additionally, there is *exposure to gays and lesbians living "gay and lesbian lives"* (Beeler & DiProva, 1999, p. 449). This theme captures how family members became exposed to homosexual people and the expression of a homosexual identity (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). In addition to attending gay pride parades or exploring a gay neighborhood, family members became exposed to the gay member's expression of identity, and one mother remarked about the first time seeing her son kiss another man, hold another man's hand, or otherwise be affectionate (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). Challenging the abstract understanding of a family member's gay identity, exposure appeared important in developing comfort and familiarity with a gay member's identity (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). This is further reflected in the additional theme of *including gay and lesbian friends in the family*, which also

refers to an individual's romantic partner (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). The family again experiences exposure to the member's gay identity, and it would be important to know how this exposure is first initiated. Family members that initially express an interest in meeting their member's significant other may be experienced as supportive and open and may foster a deeper relationship.

Through these processes, families are *making homosexuality less exotic* (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). Beeler and DiProva (1999) define this as "the process by which being gay and lesbian comes to be perceived as increasingly "normal" to family members and consequently decreasingly differentiates the gay/lesbian family member from others" (p. 449). They assert that this is achieved by accommodating one's worldview so that the gay individual is included and integrating homosexuality into daily interactions (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). Family members questioned whether their values or world views applied in a similar way to homosexuality, especially when considering how intimate relationships work (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). Such values included being monogamous and dressing or acting modestly (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). Additionally, families discussed how a family member's homosexuality is worked into mundane interactions, and one sister relates how she and her lesbian sister decided to avoid a restaurant that was known to discriminate against gay people (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). It appears that the novelty of a family member being gay begins to dissipate over time, and families find ways to integrate their member's sexuality into the family system. This may be achieved through the earlier process of seeking information about homosexuality, but it is unclear. Information could be gathered from families to learn how they perceive this process occurred.



Certain themes do provide information about common psychological processes that families may go through. Consistent with hypotheses by Savin-Williams and Dubé (1998), Beeler and DiProva (1999) found that families commonly experienced surprise, and some shock, during the disclosure process, but unlike the previous study, families did not describe feeling angry. Instead, families seemed to be *working through feelings of sadness, loss, and blame*, and feelings of sadness were related to their perception that the family member would have a difficult life, lacking children or family (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). It is conjectured that the result of this process is *developing alternative visions of the future* (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). Parents discussed how they had to adjust their expectations of having a heterosexual child who would marry an opposite-sex partner and foster grandchildren (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). The authors note that same-sex couples with children are of course a possibility but that parents would still have to adjust their notions of what a family looks like (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). This again alludes to a high level of flexibility in the family. The end result of these psychological processes may be *developing narrative coherency* where the disclosure and subsequent events are contextualized as part of the family history (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). According to (Beeler & DiProva, 1999), families “incorporate important family themes into the stories that they tell about learning that a family member is gay, their response, and the subsequent impact of disclosure on their lives” (p. 452). Events from the past are also “restoried” (p. 452) as family members reflect on past behaviors, like playing with dolls, in a new light and attribute new meaning to them (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). Additionally, some parents discussed how their own histories of parental disapproval influenced how they responded to their child’s disclosure (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). This becomes an important reminder that individual histories are influencing family dynamics, so responses to disclosure must be understood at multiple levels.

The final themes appear to relate to how the family then engages with the outside world. At a very practical level, families are *dealing with the heterosexual world's institutions and conventions* (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). One family debated about how to introduce their daughter's romantic partner while another family worried that their son would be harassed if he left the home in girl's clothing, which he liked wearing at home and was accepted by the family (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). The family's interactions with the outside world also generate various instances for having to engage in *stigma management* (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). Nearly every subject described at least one instance of hearing a derogatory remark about gays and lesbians, often when the speaker was unaware that the listener has a gay/lesbian family member, and being unsure of how to respond (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). This can often lead to the final theme of *the family coming out* (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). Families, like homosexual people, are seemingly faced with the decision of whether or not to "come out" and disclose that they have a gay family member (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). Concerns about homophobia or disclosing to unaccepting family members were expressed and may closely parallel the same concerns that the gay family member has when disclosing (Beeler & DiProva, 1999).

Also interested in the family's coming out process, Baptist and Allen (2008) utilized a case study approach and extensively interviewed a gay man's "family," which included his parents, sister, high school teacher, and best friend. This family was recruited from rural New England and identified as Caucasian and middle-class. Following the completion of the study, the authors identified four themes that appeared relevant to the understanding this family's process of coming out (Baptist & Allen, 2008). Having little exposure to the gay community prior to their member's disclosure, this family began *embracing gay identity* (Baptist & Allen, 2008). Influenced by their negative attitudes and feelings about homosexuality, the family

reported initial feelings of “shock, confusion, and resistance” (p.98), and the father disclosed how his own upbringing had caused him to be homophobic, which heavily contributed to his distress (Baptist & Allen, 2008). Driven by fear and discomfort, the family initially felt compelled to keep the disclosure a secret to avoid being judged, which is consistent with DeVine’s (1984) model (Baptist & Allen, 2008). The family described how their distress began to decrease, and their ability to embrace this new gay identity was the result of seeking information on gay culture through media, books, and PFLAG meetings, which were denoted as particularly helpful because individuals could identify with the struggles of other families (Baptist & Allen, 2008).

Following this, the next process became *integrating as a family* (Baptist & Allen, 2008). The authors indicate that a qualitative change occurred in the family as increased bonding and communication began to occur (Baptist & Allen, 2008). The individual processes of family members led to interpersonal strains as family members attempted to vocalize and share the difficulties they were having about the coming out process; however, initial discomfort led to a deeper sense of intimacy as the family active worked through this issue (Baptist & Allen, 2008). It appears that the ability to be open and vulnerable about this issue allowed the family to begin the process of integrating and accepting their family member’s identity. This is a stark contrast to DeVine’s (1984) finding that families may actively deny a gay member’s disclosure, which would create an inability to move forward. For this family, there appeared to be a genuine curiosity about gay identity that led to various family discussions about gay-related topics and social issue at large (Baptist & Allen, 2008). Interestingly, the group interview for this study represented the first time that the entire family discussed their experience of the coming out process; previously, dyadic or triadic conversations were typical (Baptist & Allen, 2008). This

format led to new revelations about the experience of certain family members and proved to be a bonding experience for the family (Baptist & Allen, 2008). Again, there appears to be a meaningful benefit to actively and openly expressing one's experience, so this may prove a crucial aspect of successfully navigating the coming out process for the whole family.

Moving into interactions with the outside world, the family also described *building social networks* (Baptist & Allen, 2008). For the family, this process began by identifying people with whom they felt safe disclosing, and the mother of this family described how frustrating it was to not have people know about this important part of her life and how she wanted people to know and be understanding (Baptist & Allen, 2008). Like the gay individual, this family is also expressing its needs for understanding, acceptance, and validation. Searching for support at home, work, and school, the family also acknowledged public media for its attempts to validate and display gay culture (Baptist & Allen, 2008). Working toward being able to disclose their member's sexuality, this family was also concerned with experiences of prejudice about homosexuality (Baptist & Allen, 2008). The family also noted how it would also be easier to be open about this issue when their family member had a romantic partner (Baptist & Allen, 2008). This idea may reflect the move of the family's perception of homosexuality from abstract to concrete, which was also seen in Beeler and DiProva (1999).

Finally, a *social awakening* seemed to occur for the family as they became aware of their new minority identity. The family appeared surprised by what this new status meant for them, yet they identified with experiences of being marginalized by society (Baptist & Allen, 2008). The family described becoming more interested in social issues, and some of the family members related being drawn to public activism and attending rallies and speeches about gay-related issues (Baptist & Allen, 2008). Other members disclosed their discomfort and aversion

to engaging social issues publicly (Baptist & Allen, 2008). Overall, this family described changes and processes that occurred at a multi-systemic level, so the authors indicate that clinical attention should be paid to these varying issues (Baptist & Allen, 2008). Noting that a Caucasian, middle-class sample was again used, Baptist and Allen (2008) highlight the need for more culturally diverse samples. Baptist and Allen (2008) also underscore the need for additional studies that collect the narratives of the entire family in order to “facilitate the emergence of a shared understanding of gay families’ standpoints” (p. 107).

Overall, there are a number of areas of research that are needed when understanding the impact of the disclosure process on families over time. In one of the few studies that have actually interviewed parents, Ben-Ari (1995) found support for the notion that parents typically experience feelings of guilt and shock at the time of disclosure, but it was unknown how these feelings change over time to achieve integration. Although both gay individuals and parents were interviewed, these were not the parents of the actual gay individuals, which would have provided a deeper understanding of how the separate accounts actually coalesce (Ben-Ari, 1995; Savin-Williams & Dubé, 1998). Most of the current available studies where parents are interviewed or researched do not include their actual gay children (Ben-Ari, 1995; Fields, 2001; Holtzen & Agresti, 1990; Hom, 2003; Robinson et al., 1989; Saltzburg, 2004). Siblings have tended to be overlooked in this area of research, even though it has been shown that siblings can often be the first family member that a gay individual discloses to (Toomey & Richardson, 2009). The existing qualitative studies have provided us with more knowledge about the process that families go through following the disclosure of a gay identity (Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Oswald, 1999; Baptist & Allen, 2008;), but more information is needed on cultural factors and

the impact of the current sociopolitical climate on familial responses. It is important to learn what are common characteristics of families that successfully navigate this process.

### **The Contextualized Family**

As this case study is inherently devoted to the functions of the family, it is important to further elucidate the notion of the family and to contextualize families within a socio-cultural frame. Having moved into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it has been suggested that it is no longer appropriate to speak of the typical American family as a family that consists of a culturally-alike, married, heterosexual couple with a working father and stay-at-home mother who raise children that will recreate a similar unit (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008). Instead, today's families comprise working mothers, single-parent households, cohabitating couples, stepfamilies, same-sex couples, interracial couples, childless couples, and multi-generational households (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008). Cognizant of this high level of diversity, the current study will accept any type of family structure as important clinical information can be gleaned from any family constellation. For instance, it is reasonable to assume that the process would look very different for a single parent whose only child was gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

Thinking beyond the number or types of members, it is important to consider what characterizes a family. In their book on family therapy, Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2008) assert that families may present in various forms due to cultural influences but that at the core a family is a social system that “has evolved a set of rules, is replete with assigned and ascribed roles for its members, has an organized power structure, has developed intricate overt and covert forms of communication, and has elaborated ways of negotiating and problem solving” (p. 1). In this study, it is vital that a thorough understanding is obtained of these various aspects because the rules, roles, structure, communication, and problem solving techniques of a family will be

tested during the identity disclosure process. In his previously discussed stage model, DeVine (1984) describes the identity disclosure event as a stressor on the family system that is intrinsically managed by these various aspects.

One area of focus in DeVine's (1984) model is family rules, as he suggests families likely do not have rules for managing the disclosure process; however, this does not mean that a family does not maintain rules about homosexuality. Discussing family rules, which can be either overt or covert, Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2008) describe how rules help regulate how the family functions as a unit and how rules are a reflection of a family's values. If a family has strict rules about gender roles and behavior, a gay family member who displays atypical gender behavior may be punished, and if this behavior is linked to one's sexuality, an implicit rule has been established that family members should not be gay. In fact, the less antagonistic rule and assumption may be that family members will be straight, and considering that rules reflect family values, it is important to explore the origins of this value.

Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2008) state that each family system is "embedded in a community and society at large [and] is molded by its existence at a particular place and time in history" (p. 1); consequently, family rules are influenced by each family's community, society, and socio-cultural context, so the culture of homosexuality has to be considered to better understand the family system's response during the disclosure process. Coined in 1972 by the psychologist George Weinberg, the term homophobia has since been used to capture and conceptualize a variety of negative attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality (Herek, 2004). The utility and accuracy of this term has been challenged, though (Ahmad & Bhugra, 2010; Herek, 2004), so in charting the progression of this term, Herek (2004) shifts focus to the social stigma that exists concerning homosexuality, which he regards as "society's negative regard for any

nonheterosexual behavior, identity, relationship, or community” (p. 6) The perpetuation of this social stigma through cultural institutions has been defined as heterosexism (Herek, 2004), and it is suggested that heterosexism is driven by heteronormativity, which has been described as the “mundane production of heterosexuality as the normal, natural, taken-for-granted sexuality” (Kitzinger, 2005, p. 478). This last definition of heteronormativity is especially meaningful for this study as it indicates that there is an inherent assumption of heterosexuality, which would inform implicit family rules about sexuality and identity. As a leading figure in narrative therapy, Michael White (1991) discusses the interplay between culture and family narratives in that cultural norms will dictate familial norms; thus, families that are immersed in a heteronormative narrative will develop family narratives that are dominated by heterosexism, likely reducing flexibility and openness during the disclosure process as suggested by McCarn and Fassinger (1996). Considering the importance of the socio-cultural climate on familial attitudes and receptivity during the disclosure process, it is necessary to understand how the socio-cultural climate has changed since the construct of homophobia was initially discussed in the early 1970’s.

First, it is important to note that although Herek (2004) explores the improved accuracy and utility of terms like heterosexism and heteronormativity, research that explores the stigmatized status of homosexuality in society has largely relied on the term homophobia. Conducting a meta-analysis of the research on homophobia in the United Kingdom (UK), Ahmad and Bhugra (2010) found that notable change has occurred in the past 25 years concerning society’s view of homosexuals at both the socio-cultural and political levels. Acknowledging the power that the media has in shaping societal attitudes, Ahmad and Bhugra (2010) found an increase in the visibility of gay characters that maintained monogamous, healthy



relationships and were not burdened by feelings of shame. This same finding has also been documented in American culture as major Hollywood films and shows that showcase gay characters have been nominated for and won major awards; however, modern depictions of homosexuals often reaffirm gender and sexual stereotype, which underscores the continuing nature of heterosexism (Bronski, 2011). Focusing on the UK, significant changes have also been found in the legislation as same-sex couples gained rights for adoption and civil partnerships and changes have been made to employment laws to eliminate discrimination based on sexual orientation (Ahmad & Bhurgra, 2010). Similarly, the LGBT movement in the United States has become involved in high-profile political struggles and attained the repeal of the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy and sodomy laws that prohibited sexual relations between same-sex individuals (Bronski, 2011). Given that increased visibility and changes in legislation are posited to challenge and change the marginalization of the gay community (Ahmad & Bhurgra, 2010), it is important to consider the level of exposure that modern day families have to the gay community and how this potential exposure influences their receptivity and flexibility when considering having a gay family member. The growing presence of LGBT youth and the lowered age of identity disclosure are noteworthy changes in American culture (Bronski, 2011). This may be suggestive of a significant change in the nature of homosexual identity development, influenced by changing societal and familial attitudes; consequently, this case study must be cognizant of the socio-cultural influences on the modern family system and its subsequent impact on identity development and familial reactions.

### **Chapter III: Methods**

This chapter presents the research methodology utilized in this qualitative study, including: research approach, participants, interview protocol, data analysis plan, and methodological assumptions and limitations.

#### **Research Approach and Rationale**

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experience of families who have had a gay member disclose their sexual orientation, specifically gay sons and brothers. A qualitative approach is being employed because the topic is best examined when we give participants the opportunity to share their unique experiences of an event and process and because it allows for a deep immersion into a given experience (Wertz et al., 2011). This approach is being used in order to contribute to the current research literature concerning the actual familial experience of the coming out process. Currently, research has largely focused on and elicited the view of the gay individual's experience of the coming out process, and the literature has relied on the individual's perspective of their family's experience. By interviewing families that have navigated the coming out process, the phenomenon of the coming out process can be better understood from a systemic perspective, which should provide both theoretical and clinical benefits.

#### **Role of the Researcher**

The primary researcher is a 25 year-old, Mexican-American male who is enrolled in a clinical psychology doctoral program and is completing the current study for his dissertation. More importantly, the primary researcher identifies as a gay male, and he disclosed his sexual orientation to his own family about 6 years ago. The implications of this cannot be overlooked or minimized. Growing up in a religious household where homosexuality was never discussed,

especially as a viable sexuality, the researcher did not feel comfortable disclosing his sexuality, and when he did disclose his sexuality, he received varying reactions, including: surprise, disbelief, concern, and supportive. Following this disclosure, though, the researcher's family never discussed his sexuality for about two years. The researcher again had to approach his family and assert his need to have his sexuality be truly acknowledged and respected. Through many uncomfortable conversations, the researcher and his family have developed a much more open and accepting climate in terms of the researcher's sexuality.

These personal experiences of the researcher are important to know because the nature of qualitative research is inherently influenced by the researcher, who brings in his own experiences as he learns about the subjects' experiences. Careful reflection and care must take place to ensure that the stories of the subjects are accurately captured and conveyed in this study. Exploring the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the researched, Hewitt (2007) argues that a basic set of ethical guidelines must exist when conducting qualitative research. At the heart of her guidelines is the acknowledgment of bias, and she encourages:

1. Closer examination of the personal qualities that researchers bring to interviews, including personal presence, values, and beliefs.
2. Explicit acknowledgement that research findings do not represent objective reality, but a co-construction of knowledge influenced by context and the belief systems of the researcher and participant (Hewitt, 2007).

The current researcher is continuing this study with these basic ethical guidelines in mind.

## **Participants**

The participants of this qualitative study consisted of three families who have had one gay member disclose his sexual orientation. The selected participants were required to meet all

of the following criteria for consideration of inclusion in the study: (a) the participants must either be a gay male or a family member (at least 18 years of age) of a gay male, (b) the gay male must be older than 18 years old but younger than 26 years old, (c) the participants must have experienced the coming out process at least one year prior to the interview, (d) participants must speak and understand conversational English, and (e) participants must also describe a general sense of satisfaction in terms of navigating the coming out process. The age range for participants was chosen in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the identity disclosure event when research has suggested it is most likely to occur. These requirements for participation were set in order to capture families at a point where they have had time to react and process the event while still experiencing the effects of the event within the family. Although efforts were made to interview the entire family system, the study was willing to accept at least one family member as an acceptable participant. Given the past limitations of predominantly Caucasian, middle-class participants, efforts were also made to recruit more culturally diverse participants.

The first set of participants was comprised of a brother and sister. “James” was a 25-year-old, Filipino-American male who identified as gay. He was in a long-term romantic relationship of five years with his boyfriend, with whom he was also living. He identified as Roman Catholic, and he was pursuing a master’s degree at a state college. “Amanda” was a 32-year-old, Filipina-American female who identified as straight. She had been married for eight years and had no children. She identified as “Catholic-lite.” She had been working as a supervisor at a local movie theatre. James was raised in Southern California to an intact family, and he had disclosed his identity as a gay man to his parents, who are married, his two older sisters and two younger brothers, who are twins.

The second set of participants was comprised of a brother, sister, and mother. “Andrew” was a 26-year-old, Mexican-American male who identified as gay. He was in a romantic relationship of about four months and was living at home with his mother and sister. He also identified as Roman Catholic. He was pursuing his bachelor’s degree at a state college, and he was working as a customer service supervisor for an online company. “Renee” was a 24-year-old, Mexican-American female who identified as straight. She was not currently in a relationship but had two young children, ages 3 and 1. She identified as “not very religious.” She was working as a secretary. “Lisa” was a 48-year-old, Mexican-American female who identified as straight. She was divorced and not currently in a relationship, and Andrew and Renee were her two children. She identified as “spiritual, not religious.” She was working as a human resources manager. Andrew was born to an intact family and raised in Southern California; however, his parents divorced when he was 3-years-old. He lived with his mother and sister. At the time of the interview, Andrew had disclosed his identity as a gay man to his mother and sister.

The third, and final, set of participants was comprised of a son and mother. “Richard” was an 18-year-old, Italian-American male who identified as gay. He was single and was living at home with his parents and three brothers. He also identified as Roman Catholic. At the time of interview, he was a senior in high school. “Cindy” was a 45-year-old, Italian-American female who identified as heterosexual. She was married and had four sons, including Richard, who was the oldest. She identified as Roman Catholic. She was working as a special education paraprofessional. Richard was born to an intact family and raised in central Connecticut. He lived with his parents and three younger brothers. At the time of the interview, Richard had disclosed his identity as a gay man to his mother and father.

## Procedures

**Recruitment.** The participants of this study were collected through convenience (accidental) sampling, a type of non-probability sampling, in two distinct ways. Sampling occurred in organizations that served the gay community, like LGBT centers, and their families, like PFLAG organizations. Advertisements for the study (see Appendix A) were physically distributed in these organizations. Advertisements for this study (see Appendix A) were also posted on websites that targeted LGBT young adults, like LGBT centers at local college campuses. Potential participants were directed to contact the researcher directly, who provided more information and administered a brief screening inventory (see Appendix B). Whether a gay individual or family member, potential participants who responded to advertisements solicited their family members' participation, and they were directed to contact the researcher in order to be screened. A gift card was offered to increase the likelihood of participation; however, a modest amount (\$50) was offered in order to preclude coercing participation. An interview was scheduled with participants who qualified for the study.

The first participant to respond was James who had seen the study flier on Facebook, an online social networking site. The study had been placed on the Facebook page of a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) club at a local state college in Southern California. He completed the phone screening and was eligible to be a participant. He solicited his sister's participation, who also completed the phone screening and was eligible to be a participant. The second participant was Andrew who had also seen the study flier on the Facebook page of a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) club at a local state college in Southern California. He completed the phone screening and was eligible to be a participant. He solicited his mother's and sister's participation, who also completed the phone screening and were eligible to be participants.

At this point in data collection, the primary investigator moved to Connecticut to complete his predoctoral internship. The study flier (see Appendix A1) was augmented to reflect the information pertinent to Connecticut. The final participant was Richard who had heard about the study at an LGBTQ support group that was held at a local hospital. He completed the phone screening and was eligible to be a participant. He solicited his mother's participation, who also completed the phone screening and was eligible to be a participant.

At the interview, an interview protocol (see Appendix C) was followed that socialized the participants to the nature of the interview and obtained their informed consent. Each member of the family was required to sign an Informed Consent (see Appendix D; Appendix D1) that detailed important aspects of the study, specifically: (a) that interviews would be about the coming out process, (b) that interviews would be audio-recorded and transcribed, (c) and that the potential existed of being contacted during the data analysis stage to clarify comments.

Additionally, participants were informed that the data was being used to fulfill part of the doctoral requirements for the primary investigator. Due to the potentially sensitive nature of the study, potential risks were outlined and discussed with participants, including the potential to experience intense or distressing feelings during and after the interview process. Appropriate referrals were provided in case either participants or the researcher should find additional help or support is needed. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point.

**Data-collection processes.** Two semi-structured interviews (see Appendix E and F) were developed for the purpose of this study. Individual interviews were conducted with the family members of the gay individual. These interviews focused on helping each family member explain their experience of the coming out process, including prior to and after the actual

disclosure event. Individual interviews were chosen in order to create a greater sense of safety and higher level of disclosure. The other interviews were conducted with the gay individual and focused on his experience of the coming out process and the perception of his family's experience. Again, this interview was conducted separately in order to facilitate an uncensored account of the family's overall experience. Afterward the interview, basic demographics were obtained (see Appendix G).

For each family, the gay individual was interviewed first; consequently, the interviewer was primed with the events of the coming out process before meeting with the family members. Given the focus of this study on how individuals personally recall the coming out process, the interviewer consciously worked to not allow previous knowledge to influence subsequent interviews. This goal was assisted by the use of the semi-structured interview, which was kept consistent throughout the various interviews. No alterations were made to include new questions.

**Data analysis.** As detailed in the Informed Consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed following the interviews. Transcribed within Microsoft Word, one electronic copy was kept on the password protected computer of the primary investigator and another copy was kept on a password protected flash drive. Additionally, each electronic file was labeled with a alphanumeric code, and each electronic file was password protected to provide the highest level of security. Within each transcription, names were altered to protect confidentiality as were certain pieces of identifying information, like names of institutions.

In answering the research questions, which are outlined below, analysis first focused on detailing the narratives of each individual and establishing a coherent family narrative. This involved reading through the transcribed data and marking passages that focused on the events



leading up to coming out, the actual coming out event, and events following coming out. In terms of identifying common themes, data analysis methods consistent with grounded constructivist theory were utilized (Charmaz, 2003). First, a line-by-line, open coding occurred in order to identify potential themes within each interview (Charmaz, 2003). Selective coding then occurred as particular themes begin to emerge (Charmaz, 2003). The constant comparative method was then be used (Charmaz, 2003). Charmaz (2003) indicates that the constant comparative method entails comparing data across and within interviews, comparing data with the emerging themes and categories, and also comparing the categories to each other. Given this study's research questions, coding and review of the transcript focused on common experiences, struggles, and triumphs in the family experience of the disclosure process. By comparing the individual interviews of each family member with each other, it was possible to see how similar the narratives of the family members were and how this impacted the gay family member.

This study's research questions are:

Research Question 1: How do the individuals members of a family recall and describe the continual process of addressing and integrating a family member's gay identity since sexual identity disclosure?

Research Question 2: What are common characteristics of families that describe a successful experience of the sexual identity disclosure process and onward?

These questions were answered by posing questions to the individual and family to understand their subjective experience of the disclosure process and events prior to and following the disclosure process. Families were asked to identify and describes their strengths and ability to navigate the process, and coding allowed for an understanding of similarities and differences.

## Chapter IV: Results

This chapter outlines results of the data collected from the face-to-face interviews that occurred with three different families, which resulted in seven participants. The first family includes James, age 25, and his sister, Amanda, age 32. The second family includes Andrew, age 26, his sister, Renee, age 24, and his mother, Lisa, age 48. The third family includes Richard, age 18, and his mother, Cindy, age 45 (see Table 1).

Table 1  
*Demographics*

	Family 1: James	Family 1: Amanda	Family 2: Andrew	Family 2: Renee	Family 2: Lisa	Family 3: Richard	Family 3: Cindy
Relationship to study subject	Self	Sister	Self	Sister	Mother	Self	Mother
Age	25	32	26	24	48	18	45
Sexual Orientation	Gay	Straight	Gay	Straight	Straight	Gay	Straight
Ethnic Identification	Filipino-American	Filipino-American	Mexican-American	Mexican-American	Mexican-American	Italian-American	Italian-American
Religious Affiliation	Roman Catholic	"Catholic-lite"	Roman Catholic	"Not very religious"	"Spiritual, not religious"	Roman Catholic	Roman Catholic

The outline in this chapter will include: (a) a brief description of the participants' background, (b) each individuals' narrative of the coming out process at different stages, (c) characteristics of each family that influenced the coming out process in a positive way, and (d) prominent themes both within and between families.

Consistent with the data analysis plan, the narratives of the coming out process for each participant were coded for themes by the primary investigator. The narratives were categorized by events (including thoughts, feelings, or behaviors) that led up to identity disclosure, events specific to identity disclosure, and events following identity disclosure that related to working

through the coming out process. This facilitated an understanding of the temporal sequence of the coming out process related to the first research question: how do people inherently describe the overall coming out process. In reviewing these three categories of events, it became clear that coming out inherently necessitated a response from others and that the very nature of this study's first research question demanded that focus be placed on what influenced that process. In addition, the first research question presupposed that events occurred that led to the integration of an individual's identity, so focus was placed on any factors that influenced that process. Given these demands, three concepts drove data analysis: how did coming out occur, how did family members respond, and how did people know integration and acceptance of a family member's identity had occurred. Utilizing data analysis methods described by Charmaz (2003), initial coding occurred by reading through each line of the narrative and identifying the events and factors that specifically addressed coming out to the immediate family, family members' responses, and the ongoing process of acceptance. These events and factors were emphasized as initial coding was conducted, and when focused coding occurred, the initial codes were collapsed into categories and themes. These prominent themes included: (a) coming out in stages, (b) types of responses to coming out, (c) expressions of acceptance, (d) cultural influences, and (e) exposure to homosexuality (see Table 2; Table 3). The first three themes are clearly a result of the aforementioned demands of the first research question, and the latter two themes were identified as coding focused on what individuals described as influences of initial responses and the journey toward acceptance. Certain themes, though, were less salient for certain families, which became clear following the line-by-line data analysis suggested by Charmaz (2003). Additionally, one theme, psychological distress, was only salient for one

family but was included due to its significant prominence for the family. It is described during the within-family analysis.

### **Participants: James and Amanda**

James was the first respondent to the study flier. During the initial screening interview, James stated he learned about the study after seeing the flier posted on his college's Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) Facebook webpage. During the phone screening it was determined that James met all the criteria for being a participant. He identified as a gay male (criterion a) who was 25-years-old (criterion b) and had disclosed his identity as a gay male to his family about 12 years ago (criterion c). He identified English as his first language (criterion d), and he endorsed the four statements on the screening inventory (see Appendix A) with either agree or strongly agree (criterion e). He was informed he was eligible to be a participant, and James agreed to participate.

Affirming his interest in being a participant, James indicated that his sister, Amanda, was a family member who had expressed interest in being a participant. James provided the researcher with Amanda's email, and after confirming Amanda's interest, the researcher contacted Amanda to conduct the initial screening interview. During the phone screening it was determined that Amanda also met all the criteria for being a participant. She identified as a family member of a gay male and was 32-years-old (criterion a) and confirmed that James had disclosed his identity to her as a gay male about 12 years ago (criterion c). She identified English as her first language (criterion d), and she endorsed the four statements on the screening inventory (see Appendix A) with either agree or strongly agree (criterion e). Amanda was informed she was eligible to be a participant, and she agreed to participate. Individual appointments were made with James and Amanda to conduct the face-to-face interview.

Table 2  
*Participants Discuss Common Themes*

Theme	James (Family 1)	Andrew (Family 2)	Richard (Family 3)
Coming Out in Stages	"[Coming out] was quite a journey; it was over multiple years." (p. 89)*	"The extent of me coming out that first time was to tell my Mom that I was asexual[...] I think a lot of that was to protect myself." (p. 109)	"I thought that If I said I was bi and said I did like girls, it would be normal, and I just wanted to be normal." (p. 126)
Responses to Coming Out			"[My Mom said,] 'It's normal; it's okay. I still love you more than everybody and everything in the world.'" (p. 127)
Expressions of Acceptance	"I'm always the butt of all the gay jokes, but it's fun. It's not in an alienating way...it's to show we're embracing it." (p. 91)	"It's interesting to see my sister wanting a relationship with me and my boyfriend." (p. 111)	
Cultural Influences	"[My parents] grew up in a time and place [the Philippines] that told them [homosexuality] was wrong." (p. 92)		"I think my family in general based on their cultural beliefs doesn't accept [being gay] [...] I don't feel like there's a lot of gay Italians." (p. 129)
Exposure to Homosexuality		"Knowing [this student] was gay[...] prompted me to not only be confused[...] but then realized it's okay, it's okay I'm gay." (p. 112)	"I started going to a group, and then I met a bunch of friends who are also gay[...] [They] showed me that like I too could be[...] happy." (p. 128)
Psychological Distress			"I didn't tell one person I was gay, and[...] every time I had a thought about a guy I would like cover it up in my head[...] I was ready to like just go insane." (p. 128)

\*Note. Page numbers refer to the discussion of each theme for each family, not to the location of exact quote

Table 3  
*Family Members Discuss Common Themes*

Theme	Family 1: Amanda (sister)	Family 2: Renee (sister)	Family 2: Lisa (mother)	Family 3: Cindy (mother)
Coming Out in Stages		"I don't think he ever really came to us and said, 'I'm gay.'" (p. 109)	"It came in little bits and pieces. It wasn't like coming out of the closet [...] It was just like a transition." (p. 109)	"Only Richard and I knew [he was gay][...] I wanted my husband to know because I didn't want to keep a secret." (p. 126)
Responses to Coming Out	"I thought [being gay] was cool. I really did." (p. 90)	"I remember that I started crying[...] To me it was out of the norm." (p. 110)	"I remember I expressed to him my concern [...] if he was gay that it was such a hard life." (p. 110)	"I wasn't sure how to react. I felt bad and scared at the same time[...] because I saw how scared he was." (p. 127)
Expressions of Acceptance	"That's cool, let's go to the clubs!" (p. 91)	"[Eventually] I didn't see anything wrong with [being gay]." (p. 111)	"He can get married, and yes, I can have grandchildren, not in a traditional sense, but I can still have grandchildren." (p. 111)	
Cultural Influences	"I don't think it would be as easy to come out to family there [in the Philippines] versus here [in the United States]." (p. 92)			"[My husband's] family was a different type of Italian. They were more outspoken and more prejudiced." (p. 129)
Exposure to Homosexuality	"I had gay co-workers, actors that would come into the shows were gay, so I think I got a lot of my exposure [at work]." (p. 94)	"I never had met a gay person when I was in high school, so to me it was out of the norm." (p. 112)	"I didn't know or have a lot of interaction with gay people and[...] whenever any reference was made it was that they were promiscuous." (p. 112)	"My brother is gay, 50-years-old, and has never fully come out, and I watched him get tormented as a child." (p. 138)
Psychological Distress				"Having my son getting [bullied] that way, it was just[...] [an] overload of pain." (p. 128)

\*Note. Page numbers refer to the discussion of each theme for each family, not to the location of exact quote

**Background.** James is a 25-year-old, Filipino-American male who identifies as gay. He is in a long-term romantic relationship of five years with his boyfriend, Geo, with whom he was also living. He also identifies as Roman Catholic. At the time of interview, he was pursuing a master's degree at a state college. Amanda is a 32-year-old, Filipina-American female who identifies as straight. She has been married for eight years and had no children. She identifies as "Catholic-lite." She has been working as a supervisor at a local movie theatre.

James was raised in Southern California to an intact family, and he had disclosed his identity as a gay man to his parents, who are married, his two older sisters and two younger brothers, who are twins.

**The coming out process.** Interviews with James and Amanda not only focused on the events of James' actual disclosure to family members but also to the events that led up to disclosure and especially to the process that occurred following disclosure.

**Pre-disclosure.** James was asked to tell in his own words the story of how he decided to come out to his family, what that event or those events were like, and how his family has addressed his sexuality since then (see Appendix E). James stated he first decided to disclose his identity as a gay male when he was in seventh grade, and in terms of his family, he had decided to first disclose his identity to his sister Amanda. He had explored others' reactions before that, though:

I had come out to like one or two friends already before that, I guess testing the waters. They were friends that I wouldn't care if they distanced themselves or not, but based on their reactions I decided that I would tell my sister[...] [She] is my best friend in a lot of ways, so I figured she would be the best person to tell first. (Interview A1<sup>1</sup>)

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<sup>1</sup> All direct quotes were personal communications obtained from participants from July, 2013 to April, 2014.

Discussing his bond with his sister, James indicated that it was important for him to be able to share this part of his life with Amanda.

We were best friends; we were always hanging out. She would always talk about the guys she was interested in[...] I was getting sad because I said, "You know, I can bond with you on this level too, because I think guys are attractive," and it was a matter, there was so many... I wanted to be able share my experiences, like my intimate experiences, not like in terms of intimacy, but things that really resonated with me. (Interview A1)

James went on to discuss how he experienced a lot of trepidation about disclosing his sexual identity to his sister despite their close bond. He stated:

I had a feeling I knew she was going to be okay with it[...] but I guess I was worried about the stigma, and wasn't sure if she was going to change her perception. I was scared that I would lose her friendship. I was scared that she was ... not that she ever gave an indication that she was homophobic or anything like that, or anti-gay, it's just I had associated that identity with so much stigma that I said I don't know how Amanda feels about it. (Interview A1)

According to James, these concerns were influenced by experiences in middle school where peers were openly taunted for being “effeminate” (Interview A1). Despite these concerns, James was able to disclose his identify to this sister and family.

**Disclosure process.** As James will describe, the process of disclosing his sexual identity to his family occurred over a period of years. When describing the coming out process, he stated, “My family was quite a journey; it was over multiple years” (Interview A1). At times, he planned to disclose his sexuality, other times it happened more spontaneously, and other times it was James’ family members who disclosed his sexuality. Sharing his apprehension at divulging his sexual identity, James initially disclosed being bisexual to his sister Amanda and described that moment in the following way:

We were at the house, actually she and I were alone at the time, and I told her, "I need to tell you something" and she said, "What is



it?" She could tell that I was really apprehensive, I was like really nervous, and I couldn't even say it. And coincidentally there was this white board on my bedroom door, so I figured that I would write it. So I grabbed this dry erase marker and wrote 'I am,' and for some reason instead of writing Gay I put 'Bi' because I thought at the last minute maybe it's not as bad. So, I wrote 'I am Bi' and, it's just funny, her face like lit up as if she was excited or something. "Okay," she said, "Really?" and she just started quizzing me and like inquiring about all the different facets of my interests and sex life and whatnot, which was nonexistent at the time, obviously, but it kind of snowballed from there really fast. [Amanda's] my second oldest sister. My oldest sister lives with her husband in Sweden, and so all of a sudden the next day, I get a phone call from my older sister saying, "Hey, she told me, she just told me." I was like, "Oh my gosh, okay," and she said, "I just wanna let you know that I love you still, you're totally the same person, and I totally support you." And then her husband ended up getting on the line, my brother-in-law, and he and I are like brothers, and he was like, "Hey bro, you know, totally support you all the way". So it was really nice, very welcoming. (Interview A1)

James' sister, Amanda, was also asked to tell in her own words the story of how James came out to her and the family, what that event or those events were like, and how the family and she have addressed his sexuality since then (see Appendix F). Amanda detailed a story that is largely similar to James. She recalled:

Well, when he first came out, it was very young. I think he was fifth or sixth grade, and he actually didn't tell me he was gay. He actually wrote it on a whiteboard. I remember this, it was in my bedroom, he wrote it on a whiteboard and says, "I'm Bi". I was like, "Okay." And he's like, "How do you feel about that?" I'm like, "I'm fine with that." I didn't think one way or the other. It was something that he was. Then I find out down the line that he's like, "Well, I was actually gay. I didn't want to just tell you that, I was gay because Bi just sounded safer." I was kinda hurt that he didn't, he wouldn't trust me in that I would be okay with it because we were so, we were pretty close even though he was really young. I don't think we hung out a lot, but to just tell me upfront... But yeah, so he told me... it wasn't something that I really struggled with. He told me that he was gay, well I found out later after he told me he was Bi, just I think maybe our relationship got maybe closer, you know, because I felt more protective of him. I didn't really think about all the bad stuff that really would happen. I

never really understand homophobia out there and whatnot. I felt closer to him, that he shared this thing with me and we're able to do things together, like check out guys together. (Interview A2)

In James' narrative there is not clarification about when he later identified his sexuality as gay, so Amanda's story provided the opportunity for the interviewer to clarify the events that led to his identification as gay. Amanda first explains her emotional response to James' disclosure:

I thought it was cool. I really did, I don't know why. I wasn't really exposed to bisexuals or homosexuals. I didn't think I really knew any. I might have heard of some actors because I was really into Hollywood and having a crush on actors, and I would find out that they're gay and be like "oh that sucks." But other than that, like my friends or anybody, I didn't know anybody who was gay, but when he told, I was like, "Oh, that's cool." Like I don't know why. You get best of both worlds I guess, because he said he was bisexual at first[...] I think that when he told me he was gay I think I got more upset that I wasn't the first one he told. Because he actually had a girlfriend, a friend that's a female, that he told first that he was gay and then he told me. (Interview A2)

The interviewer used this description as an opportunity to explore when James identified as gay. Amanda stated that it could have been a few months to almost a year later. When asked to describe her emotional reaction to James identifying as gay, Amanda responded:

I was like, "Why didn't you just tell me you were gay?" He was like, "Well I just wanted to ease you into it." I'm like, "Okay." I was like, "Is that common that they do that?" I was like, "Alright, okay, that's cool, let's go to the clubs." I was just totally cool like because we could check out guys together, that's pretty sweet. What more could you ask for? (Interview A2)

Similar to her brother, Amanda described these events in a light-hearted manner, often laughing about the events that transpired. They both appeared to view those past events with some sense of incredulity.

In continuing to tell his story, James next shifts to a discussion of how he disclosed his sexual identity to his mother. Unlike with his sister, James' decision to disclose his sexuality was quickly planned, and he identified as gay:

Another person I was really close with was my mother. And we were at a relative's house, and she and I were, in true Asian fashion, helping out with the dishes because we'd just had a big dinner. And I remember she had this really close friend of hers at work, and she was always talking about him, and he was openly gay. She totally loved him, and she was like "Sergio this and Sergio that." They were really close friends. So in my mind if she is okay with him she has to be okay with me, right? So I kinda mustered up the courage. By this time I was again fourteen, it was freshman year in high school. I said, "Mom I want to tell you something." I brought up Sergio actually to kind of bring up him, the topic, and I asked her how she feels about his sexuality. "Oh you know, it doesn't change who he is, he's still my friend" and everything like that. So then I ended up telling her and she just froze for a moment and like she literally stopped...the water was still running in the sink in front of her, and she just froze. And it was the most daunting pause for me because I was 'Oh my god what is she thinking?' And she...you could tell she was really uncomfortable with it at first, and now in retrospect it's because it's different when it's your own son, you know. You could have a friend that is gay, but obviously at that time - see times are changing so quickly - but at that time she was scared, she was worried. Mostly she was actually, she brought up to the point of being worried that she wouldn't get grandkids or something like that, like no one to carry on the family name, not having this white wedding type of thing. (Interview A1)

Later in the interview, James responded to a question from the interviewer about the impetus for disclosing his sexuality to his mother by stating, "I was starting to get kinda envious of my sisters being able to openly talk to her about their relationships and how supportive she was about it" (Interview A1). James identified his mother's friendship with a gay coworker as the "deciding factor" for his decision to disclose his sexuality to her as this suggested to James that "she has to be okay with it" (Interview A1). James clarified, though, that his disclosure was not planned in advance:

If you had asked me that morning if I had planned to tell my Mom?  
 No. It was just very spontaneous. It was like a rush of thoughts at  
 this family dinner, then all of a sudden I had this alone time with  
 her when I was washing the dishes. (Interview A1)

Amanda noted that she could not recall when James disclosed his identity to their mother, but she stated she has never heard anything “negative” from her mother and described her mother as focusing on James being “happy,” “careful, and safe” (Interview A2). James also focused on the “overprotective” response from his mother, which was reportedly uncharacteristic for her, as she began to constantly inquire with whom James was spending his time (Interview A1). James described how this led to confusion and tension in the home as James’ father was unaware of what was contributing to the change in his wife’s parenting style, and James recalled this time as very distressing as he experienced his mother as being very “harsh” (Interview A1). This tension ultimately resulted in an intense dispute between James and his mother:

I remember my most intense moment with my Mom, the most intense emotional moment with my Mom, was driving home after she picked me up from Los Angeles, and I just started bawling. And I said "I don't know, I don't know why I'm like this, Mom". Like, it was kinda at the point where... I wasn't used to having my parents, either of my parents be so harsh with me, because I was very coddled, you know. I was always the first boy and everything like that and now all of a sudden I felt like I was disappointing her, and I hated that feeling. I said, "I just want to be who I am," and my Mom just started screaming, "I don't know, I don't know. Like I don't know how to take care of this, I don't know how to do this. Are you choosing this?" She just didn't know, it wasn't because of a lack of love, like I know that, but she just didn't know how to handle the situation. So, flash forward, like, I would say, it was four years later. My Mom was starting to be more comfortable with it. (Interview A2)

James then quickly transitioned to discussing how he disclosed his sexual identity to his father and to the factors that caused some hesitation for him. He first alluded to his father’s military background as having a large influence on his father’s “abrasive,” “very crass” sense of

humor, and he described his father as “hard to read” (Interview A1). In recalling how he felt prior to disclosing his sexual identity, James recalled a couple of poignant memories:

I remember one time asking him, just to quiz him, “What would you do if the twins told you they were gay?” I had two younger twin brothers who were at this point just now starting high school where as I had just finished High School. And he said "I would kick them out, you know, their stuff would be on the porch, and they would be leaving." I didn't know how to read that, because my Dad has again this tendency to make bad humor and not realize that it's affecting me. For example we would be watching TV, and, you know, if a gay character came on, he would be like "what a fag," you know, he's like that. So I'm like, oh God, I don't know how to read that. (Interview A1)

These memories, though, were contrasted against an alternative image of his father as someone who was comfortable with his sexuality and at ease with commenting on another man's attractiveness. This ultimately led to a high level of confusion for James. James stated his father learned about his sexuality around the end of his senior year in high school after his mother disclosed it to him. James explained that a family incident occurred where a large sum of money had been taken from a cousin's debutante party, and James' mother believed it could have been him. James first learned from his sister that his father had heard about his sexuality. He recounted:

Mom went to work wondering if you could possibly be one of the people who took our cousin's money." I said, “Okay, what does that have to do with my sexual orientation,” you know. Apparently my Mom said to my Dad, "It could be James," and he said, "Well, why do you think that?" And she was, "Well several years ago he admitted to me that he's gay". I think, I think it was a cultural thing because in the Philippines that label comes with a lot of high maintenance, buy into a lot of fashion, materialistic things. It's actually a very lucrative lifestyle in the Philippines, contrary to popular belief. It's kind of like a source of entertainment when a person is gay and they dress it up and they become actually these entertainers. People go to these clubs, and they love it and they make tons of money, you know. That's the association with that label, being gay, so they thought, “Maybe he took the money

because he wants to like live up his lifestyle." That's why she told my Dad, so then my Dad in a little bit of denial went to my sister, who was sleeping on the couch at that moment, and said, "Hey, your Mom just told me that James is gay, is that true?" And she said "Does it matter?" And he said "No, I mean, it's just... you know why would he be like that, is it my fault?" And she said "No, no one's at fault." This is again according to what my sister was telling me, she was kinda re-iterating the whole scenario, everything was happening while I was at school. And she said "I don't want to upset you, but Dad said, 'Well, if it's true that he's gay, then I've failed him as a father.'" I just started crying my eyes out because you know, I love my father, I love my Dad so much, I said "That's not the case, why would he think that? That's just, that's who I am. I feel like I'm failing him if he feels that way." So, she said "Well, he's going to talk to you when you get home today." And then in my mind I was thinking my shit's going to be on the porch like what he said. So, I said "Well, I have choir practice tonight; I'm not going to be home for long. I'm literally going to go home, change and then go to my choir practice." She said, "Well, he knows, and he's planning on confronting you." I said "Oh my god," you know. So I get home, and my Dad's working on his car in the driveway. I said, "Hi Dad", not knowing what to expect, and he said "Hi, Son", like he was so cheery, like so happy. I say, "Well, I can't stay long; I'm going to choir practice." He says, "Okay, no problem." [...] So I got home from choir practice that night, and he didn't say anything. He treated me like I was his son; he didn't change how he treated me. I was waiting for him to initiate some sort of conversation because I'm not going to say, "Oh my sister told me, you know, that you know," and he never brought it up. And this was for two years, so for two years he didn't know that I knew he knew. So we just kept up the status quo and kept going with it. (Interview A1)

As James noted, the topic of sexuality was never openly discussed between him and his father for about two years. James stated he and his father were having a discussion following a disagreement between James' parents when the topic of his sexuality was finally broached.

James stated:

He was just venting about what happened with my Mom and somehow it transitioned into a conversation about just family and how much he loves the family and then I said, "Are you sure you love me Dad?" Like all of a sudden I just found myself initiating. "Are you sure you love me Dad?" He goes, "Yeah, why wouldn't

I?" I said, "Well I've been told by someone very credible that you know something along the lines that I've disappointed you. He said "Who the fuck said that?" He was really appalled at this. I said "Well, Amanda...my sister told me that you know something about me that you haven't confronted yet." He said, "Oh..." like you saw his tone just..."Oh..." I said, "Do you know what I'm talking about?" And he said, "Yeah, that you're gay?" I said, "Yeah" and he said, "Why would I be disappointed in you about that?" I said, "I don't know, you never brought it up." He said, "Well, I didn't want to make you feel uncomfortable." I said, "Well, I've known that you've known for like two years now." I said, "There is something that stuck with me that my sister told me that you said the day you found out and that's that you've failed me as a father." I said, "How could you feel that way?" He goes, "Oh, that's out of context." I said, "What do you mean, that's out of context? Like how can that be okay in any other context?" He said, "Well, let me ask you, are you okay with who you are?" I said "Yes." He said, "You know that your life might be a little more difficult than anyone else's given your sexual identity." I said, "Yeah, yeah I know that." He said, "But you're proud of who you are?" I said, "Yes." He goes, "Okay, then I've succeeded as a father because in my mind I thought that you weren't telling me because you were disappointed in yourself, and I would never raise my son to be disappointed in himself, and that is why I felt like I failed you because if you are hiding it from me I must have failed you in some way." (Interview A1)

Amanda also disclosed how she had her own reservations about their father learning about James' sexuality and even wondered if he may disown James. She attributed this to cultural pressures and expectations:

Look, my Dad, I'm not exactly sure how he reacted when James told him, I just, I thought he was gonna like disown him, Like, cause my... he being... I don't know if I can say this, being Filipino, you know, having the first born son and carrying the name, marrying and having kids, it's like, you know, like I didn't know how his feeling would be. I thought he was very old fashioned and would hate you know... just disown my brother. (Interview A2)

Amanda had some difficulty recalling the exact conversation she had with her father, but she did remember speaking with him prior to he and James speaking. She noted, “What it came down to is that he was more hurt that James couldn't approach him” (Interview A2).

At this point in the interview, James had concluded his narrative around the coming out process to his family; however, he had not addressed if or how he had discussed his sexual identity with his younger twin brothers, so the interviewer prompted James to discuss this event as well. James recalled:

I told them before I told my parents. I totally forgot this[...] We're five years apart, so they were in elementary school, so I'm pretty sure I was in high school still[...] The relationship my brothers and I have is very unique compared to a lot of other siblings. They look up to me as a brother, but also they go to me for emotional support and unconditional support and things like that[...] I noticed - the reason I was very pro-active in telling them - I noticed with this generation they would come home and use words like “queer” or “faggot.” I said, "Do you understand what those words are, do you know what those words are?" I didn't want them growing up thinking that that was...like desensitized to that. So I would try to find ways to let them know, you know, “That's really offensive.” But they had no emotional significant... emotionally significant thing to attach that too. They're like, "Why, I don't understand why that is so hurtful?" So I made the decision to tell them. So to do that, my friend and I took them to their school grounds, and it was summer, and no one was there, and we were just hanging out. We sat at a table, and I said, "So how do you feel about gay people?" And they're like, "Oh, I heard that..." and they would say these asinine things like "I heard they pounce on little kids" or things like that. Then I ended up telling them, and their reactions were astounding because one of them was so like, "Oh, okay, oh cool, okay, I still love you." The other one starts crying. It's like, you're twins, I don't understand how you're... He starts crying. I said, "What's wrong?" He said, "I don't know, I feel like, really hurt." And I said, “Okay, well...” And they're young. I was fully ready, I was prepared and braced for whatever reaction. I said I'm not going to take things personally; I'm just going work with it. I'm just happy my friend was there to help. She's saying, "Well, why are you hurt?" He said "I just feel like, like I don't know you." I said "Okay, well what do you mean by that?" He said, "Like I feel like you've lied



to me my whole life, like I feel like... " I said, "Do you feel like I'm a different person?" He said, "No, it's not that, I don't think you're a different person, I just feel like you've lied to me." Because we were so close they felt why would you not tell me these things, these things like that. I said, "Well no, I had to wait for the right time to tell you." Things like that. And then, he had these questions that were understandable, like he said things like, "Should I not sleep in your room anymore?" Because sometimes you know, I had my own room and my brothers had their own room and sometimes they'd be like, "hey we can watch a movie, set up your bed on the floor or something." We'd all just crash in one room. He said, "Should I not sleep in your room anymore or like, I mean, how does that work in terms of attraction and like do you find us attractive." Because they're young and don't get it. I said, "No, it's different; attraction is different. You're my brothers, my attraction to you is more like familial love, nothing like that, I would never do anything like that." But after that it literally took one conversation, and they had a lot of questions. (Interview A1)

James then described how his brothers had come to be very supportive of him and were advocates for the gay community. Although it is beyond the scope of this study, it should be noted that James then shared that his twin brothers had disclosed they were gay to James about two years ago. James described his own process of accepting this as he was conflicted about whether his own sexual identity had caused confusion for them. At the time of the interview, his brothers had disclosed their sexuality to their mother but not to their father. One of the twins reportedly described feeling unready to disclose his sexual identity to other people.

***Post-disclosure.*** James' narrative revealed that the coming out process comprised a number of separate events that spanned a number of years. After James had concluded his narrative of the coming out process, the interviewer asked him to reflect on the processes that occurred as his family worked to recognize and validate his sexual identity. James emphasized that his parents worked hard on "educating themselves" (Interview A1). He stated, "For my parents, it was just a matter of watching the news, hearing different stories, hearing my personal life. I think a lot of different familial events had a big impact on them (Interview A1)." James

described how a close family member who was well-loved had suddenly died and that it was only after her death that her sexual identity was known. He recalled:

They found out, more like close to after the fact, that she was a lesbian. The reason why she died single or never dated was because she never wanted to tell anyone. And so I think for them they said, "Wow, she died not, maybe not living her life to the fullest because she thought we wouldn't accept it." So maybe things like that had an effect on my Mom even without her admitting it. She wanted me to be happy. (Interview A1)

James also described how religion and spirituality became a specific area where this was addressed, noting that his mother embarked on a "spiritual quest" as she tried to reconcile the messages of the Catholic Church with her son's sexual identity (Interview A1). Noting that he has continued to attend Catholic Church with his mother, James related:

Sometimes it's hard for me to sit in that church and like there will be times where they bring up homosexuality, and I'm being told I'm going to hell and whatever. I just say, "You know what, its fine." You know like, I'm here, God knows I'm here, and he knows what kind of person I am. And my Mom's kinda adopted that same way of thinking. Like she's said that whenever the priest starts talking about stuff like that and starts dismissing that lifestyle, she's like, "I just tune it out." She's like, "I try to look at the more transcendent message of love and family and things like that." So, she's been very....she's amazed me on a lot of different levels. (Interview A1)

This conflict around spirituality also involved James' sister Amanda. He stated:

[Amanda] and her husband had a baby, and they wanted me to be a godparent. Well, in our church you need to be confirmed and heterosexual. So they said, "Well, guess we're not getting baptized at the Catholic Church." So they looked for other religions in the area that were more embracing and open to accepting all types of people. (Interview A1)

James noted that his mother was asked to be involved in selecting a new church and that she was open to helping her daughter find a more accepting church that would allow James to participate in the baptismal process.

In terms of feeling validated, James stated that he has experienced this feeling in different ways from different family members. Describing his father as a “jokester,” James identified his father’s playful jokes about homosexuality as a sign of his love and support (Interview A1). In terms of his mother, James recalled one poignant memory where he felt that his mother was attempting to accept his identity. He recalled:

The first time I knew that she was finally opening up was she was in the car with me, we were driving to church of all places, and I was driving. I was stopped right at the crosswalk and the traffic light, and this gorgeous-looking guy was walking through the crosswalk. She saw my eyes look at him, and she said "He's pretty hot, huh?" You know, "Yeah, yeah, he is." It was definitely a process for her. (Interview A1)

Overall, James placed a lot of emphasis on his family treating him like any other member.

Amanda was also asked to reflect on the family’s journey of recognizing and accepting James’ sexual identity. She asserted it was easy for her to readily accept it, but she noted that James has been her primary source of learning more about the gay community. She noted that she and other family members, like her sister or mother, do discuss James’ life as a gay man. She described particular emphasis on his safety and happiness. She stated:

My Mom and I would sometimes talk about James being Gay, but again it’s just, it’s also just checking is he happy, is his boyfriend treating him okay, but nothing just about the subject of being gay, just a typical conversation you would have. (Interview A2)

Amanda emphasized her feeling that she and her family have openly embraced James, noting that both she and her mom have attended Gay Pride festival with James. In his interview, James also emphasized the positive experience he had in disclosing his identity to his family. He stated:

It has motivated me to become even more accepting myself, because obviously even though I grew up a minority on multiple levels, you know, Asian and gay, you know, anyone can grow up

with certain prejudices and stereotypes and whatnot. And to see how my family reacted to that, it's motivated my life in so many different ways. (Interview A1)

James asserted that his family's positive reaction has allowed him to become stronger as a person.

**Familial characteristics.** James and Amanda were both asked to consider what the qualities or strengths were of their family that helped contribute to a positive coming out process (see Appendix E; F). James responded by noting that their family had experienced a significant stressor during his youth which caused a significant amount of turmoil within the immediate family. He stated that the resolution of this intra-familial stressor had fostered a sense of “close[ness]” within the family, and James' perception was that the coming out process represented a relatively easier challenge for the family (Interview A1). He also stated:

All in all our family communicates – that's the thing[...] They're not passive aggressive; they're assertive[...] My partner is Mexican, and he says, "What I love about your family is that you talk about shit. My family is so passive-aggressive" [...] We'll confront it, and we're cordial, like there are rarely any times that we are confrontational[...] We say we can deal with this in a civilized manner. (Interview A1)

When asked for her perspective, Amanda responded in a very similar manner to James. Amanda stated:

I think it's just being honest with each other, being open to communicate, [and] have a discussion. Sometimes it will be almost like a debate in a way, and getting.....you know, value each other's opinion. And maybe you don't have to agree on everything, but maybe get an understanding of where they're coming from, but not always agree. And I don't know, I think we just... family is family. I think that is what we always lay upon, you know. We're family no matter what, and we will work it out. Not just with James coming out but with other family issues that have come up. We have dealt with it, we forgive, we move on, and we're stronger than ever - things that happened with our childhood and whatnot. I mean, yeah, I think it's just our family. We just

really care about that unit, just making sure we're all together because that's really important to us. (Interview A2)

Amanda's narrative echoed the sense of family cohesion, open communication, and resilience that Andrew emphasized, and she also alluded to earlier difficulties within the family that appear to have driven the family closer together rather than farther apart.

James and Amanda highlighted a number of important qualities of their family that helped facilitate the coming out process, including cohesion, direct communication, and resilience. Additionally there also appeared to be a significant amount of flexibility with the family as members were able to open themselves to new experiences. When her brother was unable to participate in a baptism in the Catholic Church, Amanda and her husband were able to consider and embrace alternative options like locating a church of a different denomination. James also remarked on the "spiritual quest" that his mother embarked on as she grappled with her spirituality and her love for James, and he recalled being "amazed" by his mother's ability to challenge the teachings of a religion that she clearly holds in high value (Interview A1). This cognitive flexibility can also be discerned from James' narrative about his father. He described poignant memories of his father which caused him to doubt how his father may react to his sexual identity, like recalling his father saying he would disown his other sons if they were gay or hearing his father describe gay men on television as fags. In his narrative James discussed how he and his father addressed his sexuality about two years after his father had learned about James' identity from James' mother. James confronted his dad about his father's feelings of disappointment as a father, and his discussion with his father two years later revealed that he was disappointed that James may be ashamed of his own identity. In recalling her father's initial reaction to the news that James was gay, though, Amanda's narrative suggested that her father was genuinely confused and distressed by the news. She stated:

I think I sorta kinda said, "How would you feel if [James was gay]?"[...] [He said,] "You know what...well...I don't agree with it, but you know...it is what it is."[...] But then, you know, the conversation [James] had with my Dad and what he told me afterwards, I was like, "That's not what I got when I talked to Dad." That's why it wasn't very clear on what exactly my Dad was feeling when he was speaking to James because I totally got a different vibe when I was talking to my Dad. (Interview A2)

It is possible James' father was truly uncomfortable with James being gay, but he had been able to mentally accommodate this fact over time. When he and James spoke two years later, the conversation was likely influenced by the amount of time that James' father had to process the news. Amanda described her father as "stubborn" but "adaptable," and this trait was likely a significant quality that helped facilitate the coming out process (Interview A2).

**Prominent themes.** In reviewing the interviews from this study, particular themes became salient with regard to the nature of the coming out process and factors that contributed to familial responses. The themes that follow were particularly pertinent to James and Amanda's family and to the research questions that are being addressed in this study.

***Coming out in stages.*** As James stated, the coming out process "was quite a journey; it was over multiple years" (Interview A1). Happening over multiple years, it became evident that the coming out process was negotiated in a number of different stages. James noted he first began "testing the waters" by coming out to a friend or two in order to gauge their responses. Based on their non-rejecting response, he decided it was safe to take the next step of disclosing his sexuality to a member of his family, his sister. His disclosure to his sister was also done in stages, though, as he initially identified as bisexual despite knowing he was gay. Amanda stated that it was at least a few months before James identified as gay to her. Prior to this, Amanda had disclosed James' sexuality to their elder sister without James knowledge or assent, so it appeared that at times stages of the coming out process can be accelerated by family members, which

would again prove true when James' mother disclosed his sexuality to James' father. When James next disclosed his sexual identity to his younger twin brothers, he identified as gay, suggesting some greater level of comfort in negotiating the coming out process. At this point, the entire sibling system was aware of James' sexuality while the parental system was entirely unaware.

Unlike his deliberate decision to disclose his sexuality to his sister and twin brothers, James' decision to disclose his sexual identity to his mother was more spontaneous. Like with his brothers, he was able to more confidently identify as gay rather than testing the waters by identifying as bisexual. Certain familial events then led to James' mother disclosing his sexuality to James' father. Despite the fact that James had learned that his father knew, his sexuality was not discussed between them for about two years, and in a sense, James had to again disclose his sexuality to his father in order to openly discuss it and have it acknowledged. It was a number of years and different types of disclosures before James and his entire family were able to acknowledge and discuss James' sexual identity as a gay man; thus, the coming out process was not a single step but an ongoing, evolving process within the family system.

***Types of responses to coming out.*** James' family offered insight into the various responses that family members can have to the coming out process, and these responses ranged from open and accepting to tolerant and non-rejecting. Considering his sister Amanda, there appeared to be a response of genuine excitement and interest. Amanda described thinking it was "cool," and both James and Amanda described feeling they could now engage in activities like "checking-out" men together (Interview A2). This was a fairly unique initial response within the family unit; however, other members also provided supportive responses. Calling after Amanda

had shared James' disclosure with her, James' eldest sister emphasized both her love and support for James. The rest of the family displayed a different set of responses, though.

James' disclosure to his twin brothers brought the first set of mixed responses. James' account indicated that one of his brothers had a very calm response and reiterated his love for James. His other brother, though, became very emotional and emphasized feeling that James had been lying to them about who he was. He appeared confused and questioned how James' sexuality would directly impact the nature of their relationship, including whether James could be inappropriately attracted to his brothers. The age of James' brother likely contributed to his response as James' description suggested his brothers were about 9-years-old when he disclosed his sexuality to them.

Whereas James' brother appeared confused, James' parents evidenced a mixture of responses that included discomfort, disbelief, and disappointment. In recalling his mother's initial response, James described how his mother "froze" when he disclosed his sexual identity, and he noted how uncomfortable she appeared (Interview A2). Detailing her response, he described how her dream of him getting married and having grandchildren was threatened by his disclosure. James' mother, though, also expressed a significant amount of fear and concern for James and his safety. James recalled that his mother was then focused on James being happy and safe. In terms of parental responses, James' father's response is more difficult to discern as James' and Amanda's account are impacted by the different points of disclosure. Amanda's account suggested that her father was immediately troubled and disappointed by the news of James' sexuality and uncertain of how to address it. With time, James' actual discussion with his father revealed a more supportive response that focused on James being comfortable and accepting of his identity. This latter response was likely influenced by a significant amount of



time and internal processing. In reviewing these various responses, though, it appeared that James did not experience overly rejecting or abusive responses by his family. Tolerating and accepting responses manifested in various forms in James' family.

*Expressions of acceptance.* Receiving tolerating and supportive responses from his family, James alluded to feeling accepted and acknowledged by his family in a variety of ways, some more explicit than others. Considering his sister Amanda, James received an exuberant response that involved her expressing her interest in James' romantic interests and sex life. Amanda related she was excited to be able to discuss potential interests in guys and go to gay clubs. This type of response suggested a desire to openly and actively embrace James' identity as a gay man, and in particular, it was an acknowledgment of James as a sexual being. This was also expressed in James' narrative of when he knew his mother was coming to accept his sexuality. He recalled it as her simple statement to him that a man crossing the street was extremely attractive. For James, this was an important acknowledgment of his sexuality and identity as a gay man. Over time, this has become more overt as his family inquires about his long-term boyfriend, including any issues that are occurring in the relationship, and includes him in family events. James' family has also expressed their support by participating in events that are particular to James' life as a gay man, like attending gay prides. Additionally, family members have sought James' opinion on political issues related to the gay community, like legalizing same-sex marriage, which has conveyed a sense of interest and validation to James.

These previous examples represent overt expressions of acceptance to James; however, James noted ways that he feels supported that are more subtle in nature. James discussed how his parents' concern about his safety was stifling at times yet also a sign of their love and support for him. In a sense, his sexuality did not produce a change in normal parental concerns, so James

maintained his identity as his parents' son despite his differing identity as a gay man. This stability in the family's interactions was also evident in James' discussion of how humor operates in the family. He described how each member often receives jokes about a particular piece of their identity, and he stated, "I'm always the butt of all the gay jokes, but it's fun. It's not in a alienating way; it's more like...it's to show we're embracing it or including it" (Interview A1). In a sense, the family's ability to operate in a typical way but also integrate James' sexual identity represented one of the sincerest expressions of acceptance.

***Cultural influences.*** When James and Amanda reflected on influences on their family members' reactions to the coming out process, particularly their parents, they identified a couple of important cultural factors, specifically ethnic heritage and religiosity, that they believed were significant. Noting that his parents emigrated from the Philippines, James described both of his parents as traditional and conservative, noting that his sisters' marriages to Caucasian men were initially controversial in the family. Reflecting on his parents' journey of accepting his sexual identity, James stated:

I can only resent them so much for how they were acting in certain ways because they grew up in a time and place that told them it was wrong: it's wrong, you can go to hell, all those things. The Philippines is a heavily Catholic nation also, and I don't mean like "Catholic-lite," I mean Roman Catholic fear-based type religion, and that's what they grew up with. (Interview A1)

Discussing this same theme, Amanda stated she believed that James was able to disclose his identity to their family because their parents had been living in the States for so long. She related:

My parents came in like '68. I guess just growing up, you know, in just like Americanized culture [made it easier]. I think it's a little bit more laid back here when it comes to homosexuality verses maybe in the Philippines. I think it's they just got a little more Americanized; they saw a little bit more (Interview A2)

Asked to consider how coming out may have been addressed in the Philippines, Amanda responded, “I don’t think it would be as easy to come out to family there verses here,” citing the “old-fashion,” “male-dominant,” and deeply religious culture as her reasons for believing this (Interview A2)

Despite these strong cultural norms and pressures, James’ parents were able to embrace James’ sexual identity, and this may have been achieved through other unspoken cultural norms, like family loyalty. Amanda asserted, “Family is family[...] we just really care about that unit” (Interview A2). Describing the support he experienced from his family, James echoed this sentiment by stating, “We have each other’s backs” (Interview A1). In the face of competing cultural norms and expectations, it may have been that familial cohesion and loyalty superseded other cultural messages about the sinfulness of homosexuality. Of course, those former cultural messages may also have been challenged prior to James’ disclosure. This is discussed more explicitly in the next prominent theme.

***Exposure to homosexuality.*** Although strong cultural pressures have been identified as possible influences on a negative view of homosexuality, James’ and Amanda’ narratives suggested that these potential views were challenged as a result of both intimate and distal exposure to homosexuality. James noted that he reflected a lot on his mother’s close relationship with her friend and coworker, Sergio, who was gay, believing that her positive response to her friend would mean a positive response to James. He stated, “In my mind if she is okay with him she has to be okay with me, right?” (Interview A1). Although James sensed his mother was still uncomfortable with him being gay despite this relationship with her co-worker, it may be that this relationship helped contribute to her ability to become accepting of James’ sexual identity. James also noted that his family’s discovery that one of his late aunt’s was a lesbian likely

contributed to their ability to recognize and accept his sexual identity. Detailing how surprised his family was that a family member had died without ever acknowledging her sexuality, James stated, “Maybe things like that had an effect on my Mom even without her admitting it” (Interview A1).

Reflecting on her own ready acceptance of James’ sexual identity, Amanda noted that she had always been an open person and socialized with a variety of people, but she also discussed how her high school job had provided her with opportunities to meet and work with gay people. She recalled:

I did start working at the theatre until I was 18, so I was exposed to [homosexuality] more. I had gay co-workers, actors that would come into the shows were gay, so I think I got a lot of my exposure starting working at theatre. But when my sister worked there, I started attending theatre somewhat maybe at 15[...] and then ‘til I turned 18 I started working in the box office, [so] I was in more contact with more gay people, with the actors and co-workers. (Interview A2)

The family’s exposure to homosexuality, though, was not only restricted to personal contact but also involved exposure via the media. Considering its influence on her awareness of issues pertinent to the gay community, Amanda stated:

I think the media, I think kinda tells me, you know, a good understanding of what countries are not okay with it verses kinda like what's going on here[...] I think I got watching the media, I think I got more exposed to maybe, not just homosexuals, gay and lesbians, but there’s also bisexual, transgender and all that, and it's like, “Okay, there is more to this than just being gay/lesbian.” (Interview A2)

James also identified television and entertainment as an important medium for his mother. He recalled how his mother was emotionally impacted by the movie *Prayers for Bobby*, which chronicles the true story of a mother whose son committed suicide due to her religious intolerance and attempts to change her son’s sexuality. James believed that his mother resonated

with the character's subsequent spiritual journey toward acceptance following her son's suicide. James noted that his mother had been impacted by the "societal changes" that she has seen on television, including news reports of gay individuals who have committed suicide (Interview A1). These stories had caused her to question why families could not be supportive of their children.

Media portrayals also represented a significant influence on parental concerns about safety. In recalling his father's reaction to his sexuality, James noted:

My Dad was protective because of society[...] He told me, "The moment your Mom told me that you were gay Matthew Shepard just ran through my mind, like over and over and over. And you know, we live in a very conservative county, and times are changing, but they haven't changed that much yet," so he said, "I wouldn't want nothing to happen to you like that." (Interview A1)

Overall, James and Amanda's family appeared to have been notably influenced in various ways by their respective exposure to gay individuals or issues pertinent to the gay community via the media. From Amanda's perspective, this fostered a sense of openness, and from James' perspective, it also helped foster a sense of empathy as his parents could understand the issues that gay individuals could face.

### **Participants: Andrew, Renee, and Lisa**

Andrew was the second respondent to the study flier. During the initial screening interview, Andrew also stated he had learned about the study after seeing the flier posted on his college's Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) Facebook webpage. During the phone screening it was determined that Andrew met all the criteria for being a participant. He identified as a gay male (criterion a) who was 26-years-old (criterion b) and had disclosed his identity as a gay male to his family about 10 years ago (criterion c). He identified English as his first language (criterion d), and he endorsed the four statements on the screening inventory (see Appendix A) with either

agree or strongly agree (criterion e). He was informed he was eligible to be a participant, and Andrew agreed to participate.

Affirming his interest in being a participant, Andrew indicated that his sister, Renee, and his mother, Lisa, were family members who had expressed interest in being participants. Andrew coordinated his phone screening interview, so his family members could also be present and available. The researcher next spoke individually with Renee and Lisa. During the phone screening it was determined that Renee met all the criteria for being a participant. She identified as a family member of a gay male and was 24-years-old (criterion a) and confirmed that Andrew had disclosed his identity to her as a gay male about 10 years ago (criterion c). She identified English as her first language (criterion d), and she endorsed the four statements on the screening inventory (see Appendix A) with either agree or strongly agree (criterion e). Renee was informed she was eligible to be a participant, and she agreed to participate. During the phone screening it was also determined that Lisa met all the criteria for being a participant. She identified as a family member of a gay male and was 48-years-old (criterion a) and confirmed that Andrew had disclosed his identity to her as a gay male about 10 years ago (criterion c). She identified English as her first language (criterion d), and she endorsed the four statements on the screening inventory (see Appendix A) with either agree or strongly agree (criterion e). Lisa was informed she was eligible to be a participant, and she agreed to participate. Individual appointments were made with Andrew, Renee, and Lisa to conduct the face-to-face interview.

**Background.** Andrew is a 26-year-old, Mexican-American male who identifies as gay. He is in a romantic relationship of about four months and is living at home with his mom and sister. He also identifies as Roman Catholic. At the time of interview, he was pursuing his bachelor's degree at a state college, and he was working as a customer service supervisor for an

online company. Renee is a 24-year-old, Mexican-American female who identifies as straight. She is not currently in a relationship but has two young children, ages 3 and 1. She identifies as “not very religious.” She is working as a secretary. Lisa is a 48-year-old, Mexican-American female who identifies as straight. She is divorced and not currently in a relationship, and Andrew and Renee are her two children. She identifies as “spiritual, not religious.” She is working as a human resources manager.

Andrew was born to an intact family and raised in Southern California; however, his parents divorced when he was 3-years-old. He lived with his mother and sister. At the time of the interview, Andrew had disclosed his identity as a gay man to his mother and sister.

**The coming out process.** Interviews with Andrew, Renee, and Lisa not only focused on the events of Andrew’s actual disclosure to family members but also to the events that led up to disclosure and especially to the process that occurred following disclosure.

*Pre-disclosure.* Andrew was asked to tell in his own words the story of how he decided to come out to his family, what that event or those events were like, and how his family has addressed his sexuality since then (see Appendix E). Andrew related that he began addressing his sexuality with others when he was a sophomore in high school but noted that his awareness of his sexuality began prior to that time:

I knew I was different. When I was 8 or 9, there was a boy that lived behind us. We rented a back house out to him and his mother. Me and the boy would do things like undress each other, kiss each other and so.... and that has always been a recollection of mine, I've always known about it. I knew that it didn't necessarily conform to society's sexual orientation norms. (Interview B1)

Andrew shared that his exploration of his identity as a gay man began to occur during his freshman year of high school, which preceded his decision to disclose his sexual identity to others. He recalled:

You know through my freshman year there was a senior, and he was the gay on campus. He walked around with a rainbow necklace and was heavily involved theatre. And through that freshman year we hung out. It was me, him and a group of us all who were involved in theatre in high school. We would hang out a lot and some of that time would be at his parents' house where his mom and his dad lived, and I just thought it was really interesting to see that dynamic. I don't think necessarily it was a healthy dynamic; I don't think the mom or the dad ever...they never really greeted us or spoke to us, but he would walk around with the gay paraphernalia, and it was okay, and he made it okay with himself. Seeing him and how comfortable he was in his own skin, knowing that he was gay, I think that really... prompted me to not only be confused about at the beginning of my sophomore year[...]but then realized it's okay, it's okay that I'm gay. (Interview B1)

Andrew described experiencing a significant loss after this friend graduated and moved away, and this appeared to a significant influence on his decision to disclose his sexuality to his mother. Prior to disclosing his sexuality to his family, though, Andrew first identified as gay to a friend at school. He recalled:

I remember being really nervous about telling my friend that I was gay, and after I told her, she was open armed about it. She was so happy for me, she felt honored I would tell her and confide in her, and she knew that she was the only girl that I told. Soon after I realized that I didn't necessarily get negative feedback from her, I was more open about my sexuality at school. (Interview B1)

***Disclosure process.*** Andrew stated that he first disclosed his sexuality to his mother when he was a sophomore in high school; however, Andrew described a desire to “test the waters” by identifying as asexual or bisexual, even though he identified as a gay man. He stated:

The extent of me coming out that first time was to tell my Mom that I was asexual. And she was kinda confused by that, she wasn't sure what that meant, and so I explained to her that I was neither either attracted to men nor women. I think a lot of that was kinda to protect myself. I thought it would be better if I told my Mom that I wasn't attracted to anything, rather than telling her I was attracted to men and I was gay. I can't remember if it was that specific same conversation or if it was a later conversation but eventually I kind of mentioned I might be bisexual. It was also that



sophomore year of high school that I came out to a classmate of mine as gay. So I was completely aware that I was gay, I knew I was gay. At home I was kinda telling my Mom I was asexual, I might be bisexual, I'm not sure I'm so confused. At school, I was definitely out as gay as a homosexual boy. (Interview B1)

Later asked by the interviewer to describe his mother's response, Andrew recalled:

I think her response was, "Are you sure?" And I said "I'm pretty sure." I think I used the word "confused." "I think I'm confused." And she said... I remember her saying, "Have you tried to have a girlfriend, have you," I think she said, "been with." I was a sophomore, so I don't think she was encouraging sex when I was a sophomore, but I think she was definitely encouraging me to try to have a heterosexual relationship. (Interview B1)

Andrew's mother, Lisa, was also asked to tell in her own words the story of how Andrew came out to her and the family, what that event or those events were like, and how the family and she have addressed his sexuality since then (see Appendix F). Lisa described a very similar story to Andrew's narrative about disclosing his sexual identity. Although it had been nearly a decade since this event, the memory of it provoked a strong emotional reaction in Lisa:

Andrew approached me when he was probably about, I want to say sixteen, and he had told me that he was a little bit confused because, actually I think what he said was "I'm confused because I'm not attracted...I'm not attracted to men or women; I think I'm asexual." And I said... and I remember questioning him, "Well what does that mean? Do you mean that you never...you've never met a girl that you've liked, that you know, you wanted to kiss?" And he said, he actually told me, "Well, the only two women that I've liked like that were actually lesbians." And I said, "Are you a virgin?" And he said, "Yes." And then I said... and then he led on to kinda hint that maybe he wasn't asexual but maybe he was attracted to men, but it was a very brief conversation. It wasn't like a long one where we thought it out and processed it out. I remember that was the first indication that I had, and I remember I expressed to him my concern about him being gay if he was gay is that it was such a hard life, because you're not accepted in a lot of places and it can be dangerous to be that, to be homosexual and that I was concerned. My biggest fear I remember is...do people get emotional? Because I feel emotional...[crying]. (Interview B2)

Lisa shared that her fears at the time revolved around concerns that Andrew would not find a lasting relationship. She added that her limited exposure to gay people left her to believe that homosexuals were “very promiscuous” and were contracting AIDS (Interview B2). She added, “Because he kind of ended kinda like, ‘I’m confused. I don’t know if I’m asexual or I’m homosexual. I’m confused.’ And then we just kinda stopped talking about it. We didn’t talk about it for a long time (Interview B3).”

Andrew also discussed how his identity at school began to collide with his identity at home because he was finding that people at school were responding positively to him being gay; however, it was not addressed at home. He stated:

My younger sister is three years younger than me, and so by sophomore year, she wasn't in school with me at all. She was in middle school, and I was in high school. After I first realized that people didn't really have that big of a problem with my sexual orientation...if anything I found that I had more friends because I was gay, which was kinda interesting. There weren't very many gay men or gay students at my high school at all. It was probably me and maybe two other people in different classes who were also gay. But I began to be open about my sexuality at school. At home it was never discussed; I never talked to anybody about it. No one ever really said anything. (Interview B1)

These differing worlds, though, were beginning to merge as Andrew’s sister, Renee, began high school. Andrew discussed how his younger sister attending high school began to trigger some concerns for him. He shared:

By the end of my sophomore year, I began to come out, and then junior year, I was coming out. And senior year my sister was a freshman at the same high school. I was never...I was definitely worried that she would find out because everybody pretty much knew I was gay, but it never came up as a topic of conversation. When we would fight, she would say things like, in front of my mother, she would say things like, "You know, I'm...I could tell Mom, I could tell Mom what people say about you at school, and I could tell her." And I would always leave the room after that[...] It was a difficult balance. (Interview B1)

Detailing these early interactions, Andrew asserted, “While I was in high school, I never actually told my family I was gay” (Interview B1). Andrew moved away to a local college where he met more gay people and explored the gay lifestyle, including going to gay bars and clubs. He then returned home after a year and began to have more conversations with his family.

Having previously told his mother that he was asexual and perhaps bisexual, Andrew had not addressed his sexuality with his sister, who appeared to suggest that she did know in a threatening manner. According to Andrew, the topic was not broached again until Andrew moved home following his first year of college. He recalled that he was ultimately confronted by his sister. He stated:

My sister asked me to go to ice cream, and we were driving on the way to our favorite ice cream shop, and the entire ride she was quiet, she was completely quiet. I kept asking her what's going on, what's wrong? She wouldn't say, she said nothing, she would brush it off. Then finally when we parked in the parking lot for the ice cream shop, I look over at her and she's crying, and I turned to her and was like, "What's wrong with you, why are you crying?" And she blurts out, "Me and Mom know you're gay, we know you're gay and we love you, and I feel so bad because I was so mean to you in high school." I don't remember this, but she says that she avoided me a lot in high school, would even sometimes not admit to being related to me in high school. She just...tears of regret...she just cried about how much she regretted acting that way. I remember all I did was look at her and say, "Well, if you guys already know, then that makes it easier on me because I don't have to tell you." (Interview B1)

Andrew could not recall having a conversation with his mother following this discussion with his sister, and he noted he assumed she knew based on what his sister said.

Renee, Andrew's sister, was also asked to tell in her own words the story of how Andrew came out to her and the family, what that event or those events were like, and how the family and

she have addressed his sexuality since then (see Appendix F). When asked to identify when Andrew came out, she described not recalling any specific event. She stated:

I don't think he ever really came to us and said, "I'm gay." I remember in high school I was a freshman and someone came up to me, one of my friends and said, "Renee, I just want to let you know that your brother's gay." And I remember that I started crying, and I was like, "No, no he's not, like he's been with tons of girls, like he's not." It was just...I think because of the...the community we lived in and, you know, I never had met a gay person when I was in high school, so to me it was out of the norm, but I think as we got older it just...I went to a different high school, when I went there it seemed like there was a lot more gay people, so that opened my eyes and after that it just... not that it was okay, but I didn't see anything wrong with it then. And he never, he never sat down with us and said, "I'm gay." It's just we kinda knew. (Interview B3)

Renee described feeling like nothing was ever said but that somehow things changed very quickly, and she found herself going to gay bars with Andrew. When asked by the interviewer if there was ever a time that she and Andrew openly discussed his sexual identity, Renee replied that she vaguely recalled having a conversation in a car. She stated:

I think when I was younger I did tell him that me and my Mom knew and...I don't know if I said if it was okay or not, but I did remember telling him, or asking him, I remember I was in the car with him, and I asked him. And he asked me, he never gave me an answer, but I remember he asked me, "Well does it change the way you feel about me like if I was or I wasn't?" My answer was always "No." It was never going to change, but I don't know for some reason I felt like I had to know. But I think I was very young too. (Interview B3)

Renee recalled being about 14-years-old when this conversation occurred. This may be the conversation that Andrew described in his narrative, but Renee seemed to suggest that explicit conversations that Andrew was gay did not occur in the family. When asked if she was aware if Andrew ever had an explicit conversation with their mom, she replied that she could not recall any. Lisa's own narrative confirms this. She asserted:

Later on in his junior and senior year he had a group of friends from school, and to me...they appeared to me like they were gay. So then I thought, "Okay," and I think that was what helped the...kinda helped the whole process. It came in little bits and pieces. It wasn't like coming out of the closet and just saying, "This is what I am and are you going to accept me or not?" It was just like a transition. That's what I recall. (Interview B2)

Andrew also described a similar experience, noting, "I don't remember ever really having a discussion about it with my Mom" (Interview B1). All three members of this family have described a coming out process that occurred over years and was expressed in many different ways, like meeting gay friends or hearing rumors from others.

*Post-disclosure.* Andrew's narrative revealed that the coming out process comprised a number of separate events that spanned a number of years. After Andrew had concluded his narrative of the coming out process, the interviewer asked him to reflect on the processes that occurred as his family worked to recognize and validate his sexual identity. Returning to the time after he had moved back home and had been confronted by his sister, Andrew described a conversation he had with his mother following the end of a romantic relationship that led him to believe she was aware and accepting of his identity. He stated:

I began to date somebody, and I would never really bring him around, but my Mom knew about him, that I talked to him[...] I remember when we broke up my Mom walked into the room, and all the lights were off, and she sits on my bed and she says, "What's wrong?" I remember just having her hold me, and I would cry and cried and cried about how much I loved him and I wanted to be with him my entire life, and he was the one. My Mom just consoled me, and said "It's ok, he isn't the one, you're so young, you have so much ahead of you." And it was... I mean, she was using "he", you'll find the right **man**. I think that really helped our...In my head, it makes me feel that she knew and she was okay with it. (Interview B1)

Lisa also identified this moment at the point where she felt she knew Andrew was gay. When prompted by the interviewer to identify steps his family may have taken to work toward

accepting his identity as a gay man, he responded, “My Mom didn’t take any steps other than just accepting it” (Interview B1). He noted, though, that events like her getting a man’s number for him from her cosmetologist or going to a gay bar for his birthday were clear indications that she had become accepting of his identity. He added that he had recently been struck by his sister’s demands to spend more time with him and his boyfriend. He stated, “It’s interesting to see my sister wanting a relationship with me and my boyfriend[...] this is probably the most serious relationships I’ve ever been in and I think she wants to be involved in that” (Interview B1).

Lisa was also asked to reflect on the family’s journey of recognizing and accepting Andrew’s sexual identity. Lisa stated that her journey actually began prior to Andrew initially identifying as asexual and bisexual. She related that a previous boyfriend has suspected Andrew might be gay and had shared this suspicion with her. Although she did not necessarily agree with this boyfriend, Lisa recalled being forced to at least consider the notion and entertain it as a possibility. She had noted that Andrew did not enjoy “rough housing” like his male cousins and that he seemed different from them (Interview B2). When asked by the interviewer if Andrew’s initial disclosure of being asexual or bisexual was a surprise, Lisa responded, “It wasn’t completely out of the blue, it wasn’t like a shock,” but she went on to say that she was very “confused” because she had memories of Andrew as a young boy holding a girl’s hand or hearing from other kids that Andrew had kissed a girl on the playground (Interview B2).

Lisa also discussed the struggle of addressing the unspoken nature of Andrew’s sexuality in terms of the family unit. Like Andrew, Lisa also recalled her daughter Renee’s threats of exposing a secret about Andrew. Lisa stated:

While they were both in high school, she was a freshman and he was a senior at that time, and every time they would start bickering

and fighting, I used to hear her always saying, "I'm going to tell Mom, I'm going to tell Mom, you just wait!" as a threat. And after I heard it a few times, I remember I finally told her, "You're always saying this, and I wanna know what it is you have to tell me. Just tell me." And she said, "No, no, I'm not going to tell you." And then I asked her... well that's when it... I said, "Is it because Andrew's gay?" And she said, "You knew?" And then I said, "Yes." And then she started crying, and she was saying, "I can't believe you knew." I think she felt betrayed. (Interview B2)

Lisa described understanding her daughter's distress but emphasized that it was important to her to maintain Andrew's confidentiality as he was a "private person;" however, Lisa also shared, "Maybe down deep inside I was hoping that he was truly confused" (Interview B2). She described not only confronting her fears of Andrew being rejected by others but also letting go of her dreams of Andrew having a "traditional marriage" and of not having grandchildren (Interview B2). Lisa clarified, though, "He can get married, and yes, I can have grandchildren, not in a traditional sense, but I can still have grandchildren" (Interview B2).

Andrew's sister, Renee, was also asked to reflect on the family's journey of recognizing and accepting Andrew's sexual identity. Renee also discussed how her journey of acknowledging and accepting her brother's identity began before any overt conversation occurred between them as people in high school were telling her that Andrew was gay. As detailed earlier in Renee's narrative, she had some difficulty accepting this, which she attributed to the school environment, but grew more open as she was exposed to other gay people at her new high school. In recalling what prompted her initial emotional response, Renee stated, "I think because I truly, at that time, probably thought it was wrong or it wasn't okay, and it was different" (Interview B3). She asserted, though, that moving to a new school where gay people were more visible helped change her perception. She identified a dramatic shift occurred very quickly where she went from not openly discussing Andrew's sexuality to attending gay bars

with him. She also described how she has raised her oldest daughter, who was six, to be open to her uncle having a boyfriend and that it is openly discussed in the home. She stated she is working to have more interactions with Andrew and his boyfriend.

**Familial characteristics.** Andrew, Renee, and Lisa were all asked to consider what the qualities or strengths were of their family that helped contribute to a positive coming out process (see Appendix E; F). Andrew focused on his relationship with his mother and stated, “I know my Mom would always stick up for me, even if she knew I was wrong. She would protect me, beyond anything else, and I think knowing that, that we have that quality, I knew I would never be kicked out of my house” (Interview B1). He added:

The value of family was always, even when me and my sister would fight, my Mom would always be you know "We are all we have." I think that was a big mantra of me growing...“We are all we have, so you two need to stop fighting. You two are all you have, you guys need to love each other, and we are all we have.” I think that was a big slogan of my upbringing with my mother: we were all we had. I think that was also a good value in that I **knew** we were all we had. I knew my Mom would never disown me or turn me away because I was gay or for any reason. (Interview B1)

Considering this question about familial strengths, Lisa also emphasized the importance of familial cohesion. She stated:

Well, I truly believe that even though we have extended family, I always instilled in the kids that we are all we have together, tight, so we always have to take care of each other and be supportive of each other. I think that's what kinda helped us with this process is that it was important for Andrew to know that it was...it was okay with us. And I think that's what it is. And even though it takes us time to bring things to the surface, when things do come to the surface, I mean it's like we don't hold back. When we finally get to that point, it's like everybody says their opinion, and we just deal with it[...] It's really we feel we can say whatever we want to say at that time[...] I wanna say it's more of a bond. That's how I instilled a bond in them. It's that I see so many families that separate, and they didn't have any kind of relationship with their siblings. And because I only had two children I really wanted



them, or if something should happen to me, I didn't want... I always want them to be connected, be in each other's lives. So I think that's why I always told them that...is that we only have each other. We have to support and love each other and be there for each other. (Interview B2)

This focus on supporting each other and maintaining a familial bond was also emphasized by Renee, but she also identified her own openness as an important factor. When asked about her family's strengths, she responded:

I think it's[...] happen[ed] quite easy only because now I have an open mind. I don't have any disagreements with it, and I'm going to love my brother either way, and I'm going to support my brother either way, and I think my Mom is the same way. We're never going to turn our back on our family member just because of their choices or the way they feel. (Interview B2)

Andrew, Renee, and Lisa indicated various aspects of their family that they believed helped contribute to the coming out process. Each member identified the importance of familial love and cohesion, as exemplified by the family mantra “we are all we have,” but individual members emphasized other personal and familial qualities. Lisa indicated that open communication was an important quality, noting that it can take some time before topics will surface, and Renee emphasized the importance of her own openness and cognitive flexibility. This latter trait also appeared evident in Lisa's narrative. When considering her initial thoughts and reactions to Andrew being gay, Lisa stated, “I think I was hoping he was straight” (Interview B2). She recalled, “I thought ‘Okay, I'm not going to have grandchildren; he's not going to have a traditional marriage.’ I was thinking[...], ‘Do I profess it to my family. How do I do this?’” (Interview B2). These statements revealed the disappointment Lisa experienced as she realized that her inherent beliefs that Andrew would be heterosexual, have a “traditional” marriage, and have grandchildren were invalidated. As noted earlier, though, Lisa came to believe that Andrew can still get married and she can still have grandchildren even though it may not occur in the

“traditional sense.” This change in beliefs revealed a significant amount of cognitive flexibility. Renee also experienced a shift in her belief system as she her exposure to gay people allowed her to challenge what she believed to be normal, and she stated “I didn't see anything wrong with it then” (Interview B3). It appears the combination of these various qualities allowed the family unit to navigate this process over time.

**Prominent themes.** In reviewing the interviews from this study, particular themes became salient with regard to the nature of the coming out process and factors that contributed to familial responses. The themes that follow were particularly pertinent to Andrew, Renee, and Lisa’s family and to the research questions that are being addressed in this study.

***Coming out in stages.*** In recalling the coming out process, Andrew and his family emphasized the fact that it occurred in small pieces over many years. The family agreed that in some sense Andrew never actually had a conversation where he identified as gay. Prior to attempting to discuss his sexuality with his family, Andrew had disclosed his sexual identity to a friend and received a very positive, supportive response. Wanting to disclose his identity to family, Andrew decided to “test the waters,” so he first approached his mother by sharing that he was asexual or perhaps bisexual (Interview B1). He emphasized feeling confused, allowing a lot of room for uncertainty and ambiguity, and this approach appeared to be very helpful for Lisa. She stated, “[It] kinda helped the whole process. It came in little bits and pieces. It wasn't like coming out of the closet and just saying, “This is what I am and are you going to accept me or not?” It was just like a transition.” It appears this approach may have allowed the disclosure to be less jarring for Lisa and less threatening for Andrew as he could gauge his mother’s reaction along the way.

Renee also noted that she did not believe Andrew ever came out as gay to either her or their mother. Renee's process of learning about Andrew's sexuality began as a result of peers in high school, and she initially responded with disbelief to their assertions that her brother was gay. It appears that the most explicit conversation about Andrew's sexuality actually occurred between Lisa and Renee. Although they could discuss and acknowledge Andrew's sexuality, it was not until Andrew returned from his first year at college that he and Renee could more openly discuss his sexual identity. Renee then provided the confirmation that the family already knew, and Andrew felt that he did not need to clarify to his mother that he was gay and not asexual or bisexual. For Lisa, she felt she finally knew Andrew was gay after his first "heartbreak" during freshman year of college. Andrew also identified this moment as the point where he felt that Lisa accepted his sexuality. For this family, the disclosure process occurred in small stages over a number of years and was more subtle in nature.

*Types of responses to coming out.* Considering Lisa and Renee's responses to the news that Andrew was not heterosexual, it was clear that both experienced an array of emotions partially fueled by a sense of disbelief and disappointment but also by fear. Lisa noted that her initial response focused on the "hard life" to which she imagined Andrew would be subjected as she pictured him being rejected by others and being unable to find a lasting, fulfilling relationship (Interview B2). Additionally, Lisa was also concerned that her dream of Andrew getting married and having children would never occur. The ambiguous nature of Andrew's disclosure, though, allowed Lisa to maintain hope that Andrew would be straight and that her dreams for him could still happen. Despite this hope though, as she recalled Andrew's break-up in college as the moment she felt she knew he was gay, Lisa shared her reaction of wanting to simply comfort Andrew. She stated, "He was heartbroken, so I just wanted to comfort him and

try and make him feel better” (Interview B2). It would seem that despite her unspoken hope that Andrew would be straight Lisa again engaged her feelings of protectiveness and simply wanted to comfort her son who was hurting.

Renee also described her own emotional response as peers in high school began asserting that Andrew was gay. She recalled crying and actively denying these claims, but she had difficulty articulating what was so distressing about these statements. Renee expressed her belief that she felt “ashamed” at the time because homosexuality was different and not part of the “norm” (Interview B3, 2014). As a freshman in high school, Renee had no exposure to gay individuals, and her distress appeared directly related to the perception that homosexuality was abnormal or atypical. Andrew recalled Renee stating she had avoided him in high school and regretted it, but he related he never noticed her avoiding him. Despite her initial difficulties recognizing Andrew’s sexuality, Renee was able to develop a deeper awareness about homosexuality, allowing her to become more accepting of her brother’s identity.

*Expressions of acceptance.* Although there was initially a significant amount of ambiguity about Andrew’s sexuality, events occurred over time that allowed Andrew to feel that his family had come to accept his identity. Like his disclosure, these events were at times also subtle in their own manner. In recalling the break-up he experienced during his freshman year of college, Andrew described how his mother comforted him, and what he most appreciated was her acknowledgment that he was describing a relationship with a man. He recalled, “She was using “he.” You’ll find the right **man**[...] In my head, it makes me feel that she knew [I was gay] and she was okay with it” (Interview B1). Andrew appeared to most appreciate the validation of his identity as a gay man as his mother was comfortable with acknowledging he had been in a relationship with a man and that he could find a successful relationship with a man.

Most of this validation was conveyed in the simple use of the word “he.” Andrew stated that over time his mother has become increasingly supportive, recalling one instance a year or two ago where his mother had gotten a man’s number for him through her cosmetologist. He noted, “Never in a million years would that have happened back then,” alluding to when his mother was first coming to terms with his sexuality (Interview B1). He added that his mother has met his gay friends and openly asks about events Andrew attends like gay pride festivals, and he noted that his mother has also attended gay bars with him for his birthday. Overall, this has conveyed a sense of acknowledgment and acceptance to Andrew about his identity as a gay man.

Andrew described a more conflictual past with his sister where they would often use information as “ammunition” against each other (Interview B1). Andrew recalled his sister’s confrontation of him being gay as a turning point in their relationship, though. Although he could not recall her avoiding him, Andrew was touched by the sincerity of his sister’s remorse, and he described experiencing a sense of relief that his family knew he was gay and was accepting of it. In terms of additional expression of acceptance, he stated his sister has been in going to gay bars with him and meeting his friends. Most recently, his sister has been very vocal about wanting to spend more time with Andrew and his boyfriend. Andrew described being initially confused by this, but he stated he feels that his family recognizes that it is an important relationship to him. Overall, Andrew described a growing level of validation and acceptance of his sexual identity by his family.

***Exposure to homosexuality.*** For all three members, varying levels of exposure to homosexuality had a significant influence on their views of homosexuality and subsequent reactions to Andrew’s coming out process. Andrew described being significantly impacted by a senior at his high school who appeared to be openly gay, especially at home. He recalled:

“Seeing him and how comfortable he was in his own skin, knowing that he was gay[...] prompted me to not only be confused about [it] at the beginning of my sophomore year[...]but then realized it’s okay, it's okay that I’m gay” (Interview B1). As this student graduated and moved away, Andrew was driven to get his own sexual identity acknowledged by both friends and family.

For Lisa, her exposure, and lack thereof, to homosexuality significantly influenced the fear she initially experienced when Andrew first identified as asexual or bisexual. She stated:

I didn't know or have a lot of interaction with gay people and then all I...I remember whenever any reference was made it was that they were promiscuous and that they were not careful. And then I worked at a hospital, and I remember being in the emergency room when AIDS first came out and the residents[...] I remember them being around the nurses’ station like fighting about who was going to attend this patient that had contracted AIDS. That scared me. (Interview B2).

Lisa’s knowledge of homosexuality was initially restricted to stereotypes about promiscuity, and she was largely concerned that Andrew might contract HIV, so her initial reactions reflected the fear that these ideas induced. She noted that meeting Andrew’s friends has helped her to gain new perspectives on homosexuality and the life Andrew can have.

Renee indicated that it was her lack of exposure to gay people that contributed to her strong emotional response when high school peers were saying Andrew was gay. She asserted that she was unable to challenge her assumptions that homosexuality was abnormal and atypical. She stated that moving to a new high school allowed her to meet more diverse people, including gay people, which “opened [her] eyes” (Interview B3). Renee was able to challenge her initial beliefs and become more open and accepting. This contributed positively to her ability to acknowledge and accept her brother being gay. Being exposed to gay people became a powerful factor for the entire family as they attempted to acknowledge and accept Andrew’s sexuality.

**Participants: Richard and Cindy**

Richard was the third respondent to the advertisement of the study. The researcher had promoted the study at LGBTQ support group that was for young adults, and Richard expressed his interest in the study. A phone interview was scheduled with Richard. During the phone screening it was determined that Richard met all the criteria for being a participant. He identified as a gay male (criterion a) who was 18-years-old (criterion b) and had disclosed his identity as a gay male to his family about 3 years ago (criterion c). He identified English as his first language (criterion d), and he endorsed the four statements on the screening inventory (see Appendix A) with either agree or strongly agree (criterion e). He was informed he was eligible to be a participant, and Richard agreed to participate.

Affirming his interest in being a participant, Richard indicated that his mother, Cindy, was a family member who had expressed interest in being a participant. Richard coordinated his phone screening interview, so his mother could also be present and available. The researcher next spoke with Cindy. During the phone screening it was determined that Cindy met all the criteria for being a participant. She identified as a family member of a gay male and was 45-years-old (criterion a) and confirmed that Richard had disclosed his identity to her as a gay male about 3 years ago (criterion c). She identified English as her first language (criterion d), and she endorsed the four statements on the screening inventory (see Appendix A) with either agree or strongly agree (criterion e). Cindy was informed she was eligible to be a participant, and she agreed to participate. Individual appointments were made with Richard and Cindy to conduct the face-to-face interview.

**Background.** Richard is an 18-year-old, Italian-American male who identifies as gay. He is single and is living at home with his parents and three brothers. He also identifies as

Roman Catholic. At the time of interview, he was a senior in high school. Cindy is a 45-year-old, Italian-American female who identifies as heterosexual. She is married and has four sons, including Richard, who was the oldest. She identifies as Roman Catholic. She is working as a special education paraprofessional.

Richard was born to an intact family and raised in central Connecticut. He lives with his parents and three younger brothers. At the time of the interview, Richard had disclosed his identity as a gay man to his mother and father.

**The coming out process.** Interviews with Richard and Cindy not only focused on the events of Richard's actual disclosure to family members but also to the events that led up to disclosure and especially to the process that occurred following disclosure.

**Pre-disclosure.** Richard was asked to tell in his own words the story of how he decided to come out to his family, what that event or those events were like, and how his family has addressed his sexuality since then (see Appendix E). Richard related that his mother had found out he was gay and that he was not prepared to tell her; in fact, Richard had been unable to identify as gay to himself. He had been experiencing a lot of psychological difficulties at this point in his life and had been receiving psychological treatment. Richard stated:

I didn't tell one person I was gay, and I was just like every time had a thought about a guy I would like cover it up in my head and say like...I had like these OCD rituals I would do when I thought about them. Like I would say to myself like 10 times, "No, I like girls, I like girls, I like girls." And then I like envisioned myself with a girl and like ignore it. And so I was like ready to like just go insane. (Interview C1)

**Disclosure process.** As he was struggling with thoughts of being attracted to men, Richard stated he was not intending to disclose his identity to his mother as he had not accepted that identity to himself. He stated, though:



Well, when I came out I was a freshman, and my mom found out. And I begged her not to tell my dad because I just wasn't sure how my dad would find out. And when my mom found out she was really supportive. She said that we can work through it. She wasn't too sure like if I was too young to have those feelings, but she was very supportive like regardless. So I talked to her, I remember it was like 11 o'clock at night when I told her, and we talked about for like maybe two hours, and I was like bawling because I was always denying it in my head. And then like so I came out to my mom as bi, and I told her that I didn't like guys anywhere near as much as I liked girls, but I obviously was just saying that because I wasn't ready to admit to myself. And then she handled it very well, she was very supportive. (Interview C1)

Having alluded to his mother discovering he was gay, the interviewer explored the circumstances behind this discovery. Richard confirmed that he had not intended to share his feelings of attraction with his mother. He recalled:

Well, I think I was just extremely overwhelmed, and I was...I remember her and I were downstairs in the kitchen, and...this is really embarrassing but she found like a naked picture on my iPod of someone...or my computer...so when she saw that she said, "Are you gay?" And I told her, "No, no, I'm bi," and it was just a mess. That caused the whole thing to just like blow out of proportion a little bit and like be worse than what it probably had to be. (Interview C1)

Richard added, though, that he was glad his mother had learned about his sexuality because he had been feeling ready "to go insane" (Interview C1). When asked to describe his mother's supportive response, Richard recalled that she stated, "It's normal; it's okay. I still love you more than everybody and everything in the world" (Interview C1). He described how surprising this positive response was because he had been unable to acknowledge his feelings to himself.

Richard's mother, Cindy, was also asked to tell in her own words the story of how Richard came out to her and the family, what that event or those events were like, and how the family and she have addressed his sexuality since then (see Appendix F). Cindy described a

similar story to Richard's story, though she initially had some difficulty identifying when she first learned. She recalled:

To be honest it's a little blurry because I can't remember what happened first. He was getting picked on in school, so I brought him to speak with Dr J. And he was, that's when he told me. But I can't remember if that happened first, or I had my computer on and something came up that he was watching and he turned pale and started shaking because he was at the counter. I said, "What is this?" And then I knew right then that if he was watching...maybe there was an issue. I can't remember which came first. I think that might have come first. (Interview C2)

Given Richard's narrative, Cindy was encouraged by the interviewer to discuss this latter event.

Cindy stated:

I was putting in a diet CD, and it wasn't coming up. A picture of two men came up, and they were you know engaging in sexual acts, and I said, "Oh my God, what is this? Like what's wrong with my computer?" So he got up quick, and he saw it and hit some buttons. And he sat back down, and he turned pale as a ghost, and I could see his heart shaking. And then I like felt bad because I knew that he knew what that was. He's like, "Mom, I am sorry, I was looking at something." And I don't know how it came on my computer when I put in...I thought the disc that I had bought was like...So then we talked a little bit about it, and I didn't want to react because I didn't want him to get hurt. Like I wasn't sure how to react. I felt bad and scared at the same time[...] I felt bad because I saw how scared he was. He obviously was affected by it, and he was pale and shaken, and that kind of tore me apart a little bit. And then it was like an up-and-down year because he was getting picked on by kids at school. We didn't find out for a full year. [They] were calling him...were calling him faggot, so.... (Interview C2)

At this point, Cindy began fighting back tears and took a moment to collect herself. She went on to relate how she discussed that pornography was inappropriate to be watching and that it did not convey the importance of love in sexual acts. She further stated:

Well, we were trying to keep quiet because my husband was upstairs and at the time he didn't know anything about it. So I was like, "Richard, what's going on?" He was like, "Mom, I don't

know, I'm sorry, I was just looking at that stuff. "How long have you been looking at it?" "A lot. I feel like I'm coming home from school looking at it." At this time he wasn't diagnosed with OCD or anything like that but we just had a quick conversation. We said we'd talk about it and then my husband came down the stairs and we kind of kept it between the two of us and I probably shouldn't have. (Interview C2)

Cindy emphasized, though, that this was the beginning of a "long process" that progressed as Richard was receiving treatment in counseling.

Richard discussed that he did not disclose his sexuality to his father until months after his conversation with his mother. Richard had been seeing a therapist who helped him attempt to process his feelings about his sexuality; however, Richard had been experiencing intense distress and psychological difficulties which led to a suicide attempt. He recalled:

A couple of months after that I had tried to kill myself, so I had to go into the hospital. I didn't try to kill myself because of the sexuality. I mean, that was a huge part of why I tried to, but it was mostly just because I was anxious, I was getting bullied in school, and just a bunch of things at once. So while I was in the hospital, I came out to my father in a family meeting, and he looked really, really shocked and he like got really... I don't know he just, you could just tell that it kind of hit him hard. And apparently on his way home from the hospital he called my mom on the phone and said, "Why didn't you tell me? I wish you would have told me ahead of time, so I didn't get shocked with all this." And after that my dad never and I never talked about it again 'til the fall of my sophomore year. And that was when I went into hospital again, and when we were talking about it that time, I mean I remember when I was in the hospital during my sophomore year I... there was a guy in the hospital who I thought was cute, and I tried to tell my dad about it just because I felt like I kind of accepted it a little more so hopefully my dad would. And my dad got really uncomfortable, and I could tell. So it has always been kind of struggle with my dad. (Interview C1)

Asked to recall this time as well, Cindy described the events preceding and following Richard's suicide attempt and hospitalization as a very stressful, confusing time. The pressure

appeared influenced by the fact that Richard's father did not know that he had come out to his mother. Cindy stated:

Only Richard and I knew. Talked about it at the doctor's in [city]. I wanted my husband to know because I didn't want to keep a secret from, and I didn't want Richard to feel it was a secret, but the doctor at that time felt that when Richard is ready to tell my husband that I have to respect the way Richard feels, and we can't tell my husband until he's ready. Then what happened in term was Richard ended up doing what he did to himself, and it came out over there that I knew that Richard was and I didn't tell him and it turned out to be this big, horrible conflict between my husband and I[...] He said I should have told him, that we are husband and wife and I should have told him that Richard was. And I said "Well, I needed to have Richard trust me, and I was told by the doctor that I shouldn't say anything, that it's up to Richard and then I was put in the middle and I did tell the doctor that I wanted to tell you, but I didn't want to lose Richard's confidence because he was feeling so bad about himself." (Interview C2)

Asked to describe her husband's actual reaction to Richard's disclosure, Cindy was also struck by how uncomfortable her husband was, and she echoed Richard's own description of his father's reaction. She recalled:

[Richard's father] had told him that he will accept him no matter what and that he loves him. But I think that in the beginning, I think a lot of people can say that, but you really don't feel that. You know like actions speak louder than words, and I think Richard knew that his father was uncomfortable[...] Because he just wasn't as loving I think as he should be and as relaxed. He was very uptight and rigid. (Interview C2)

Cindy noted, though, that her husband is "one hundred times better" and has grown a lot since Richard's disclosure a few years ago (Interview C2). Richard also emphasized his father's growth and described him as very supportive now.

**Post-disclosure.** Richard's and Cindy's narratives revealed that the coming out process comprised a number of separate events that spanned a few years and that it is still ongoing. Both Richard and Cindy noted that they are planning to share Richard's sexual identity with his

brothers soon. Cindy also revealed that her journey of acknowledging and accepting Richard's sexuality began prior to the disclosure that has been described. Cindy recounted:

When Richard was in second grade he came to me and he said he thinks he has a crush on a boy. And I should have gotten help, not help, I don't think he needed the help, but I should have allowed him to just evolve, and I kind of pushed that away[...]He came home, he was all nervous, and "Mom, Mom, you know I hugged this boy and I felt kind of weird. I felt like I have a crush on him." I'm like, "Yeah?" He's like, "Yeah." I was like, "Well, okay." And I said, "Well maybe you do...maybe you don't. You know we all have different feelings and when I was little girl there would be older girls that I looked up to..." Because he was more afraid about "Why is this happening? I don't want this to happen." So I said, "There was older girls that I would look up to. You know sometimes you can get confused with what a crush means." You know and I was kind of in a weird way kind of swaying him thinking that it wouldn't...you know just because I was so afraid he was going to get hurt the way he did in the middle school. (Interview C2)

Cindy went on to discuss how the initial process of grappling with Richard's sexuality caused her to feel like she was looking out a window into "a fog" (Interview C2). She stated:

When it first comes to you, everything is cloudy, and then as you educate or as you feel safer that people are not going to hurt him - this is for me - as I felt that he's more comfortable with who he is...like the window start to get clearer, you know I could see more. You are accepting. (Interview C2)

When asked to reflect on how this process unfolded, Cindy emphasized the impact that Richard's psychological difficulties had on her as a mother. She disclosed her belief that all of Richard's anxiety and distress were related to his fears of being gay.

The journey of accepting his own sexuality was a long journey for Richard. His own account of his psychological distress and suicidality highlights the internal turmoil he was experiencing, particularly related to this sexuality. When asked to describe what the idea of being gay meant for him, Richard responded:

I thought that if I was gay - and I didn't realize this was false until about six months ago - but I thought that if I was gay I wouldn't be able to have a...have it all. Like have a happy life with someone I love, have kids, like just being myself, and be truly happy. I thought that none of that would be possible. (Interview C1)

The interviewer then asked Richard to identify what has allowed him to challenge that notion.

He stated:

I started going to a group, and then I met a bunch of friends who are also gay[...] I've just been hanging out with them a lot and[...] they are the happiest, real people that you ever meet. And like they have the most fun. They have like perfect lives it seems just because they are so true to themselves. And just the fact I surround myself with them showed me that like I too could be like that and have it all and be happy. (Interview C1)

Richard added that he and his therapist were also able to discuss his sexuality during treatment and that he had been unable to discuss it prior to coming out to his mother. He stated, "Until my mom find out, I didn't even say it out loud to myself" (Interview C1).

Initially identifying as bisexual to his mother, Richard related that it took some time before he could identify as gay to his family. He stated, "I thought that if I said I was bi and said I did like girls, it would be normal, and I just wanted to be normal" (Interview C1). Richard related that he had returned to the hospital again and had found himself attracted to another male patient. This prompted another discussion about his sexuality, and Richard described his father's reaction as potentially worse than his initial response. He stated, "Now that I like had a crush on a guy, he just seemed very weird about it like. He didn't seem comfortable with it at all" (Interview C1). Richard had also received a negative response from one of his peers, and he found himself questioning whether or not he was gay. He recalled:

I came out to one of my best friends, and he stopped talking to me. My parents told me not to come out to him, and I was like, "I'm gay, I'm gay, I'm gay, and I need to tell someone." Just because I was just like so excited that I was finally accepting it. So I told

him, and he was very quiet about it and stopped talking to me for like weeks. Like he wouldn't call me at all, and he used to talk to me every single day. So since he wasn't talking to me, I got really confused, and I thought, "Okay, you know what, I'm probably not gay." And I started to pretend I was straight, and I tried thinking as like a straight guy like I tried thinking about girls. I tried going out with girls and having relationship with girls and like ignoring guys that I thought I liked completely. And so I told my dad that I was straight again, and I told my mom, "I think I'm straight," and I told my friend Matt, "I think I am straight again." And he[...]still didn't talk to me, but when I told my dad I was straight, he said, "Okay, well whatever you are I love you no matter what." And that was a little weird because it was weird how when I told him I was gay and I liked a guy, how he didn't seem too comfortable with it, but right when I told him, I was, I think I might be straight and I think it was just a phase I went through, he was like, "Oh, well I love you no matter what." (Interview C1)

Richard stated that he was hospitalized about two more times before he could openly discuss how he had been trying to act straight in response to his friend's rejection and could definitively identify as gay to his family. He continued to notice that his father appeared less supportive when compared to his mother. Richard noted, though, that over time he has begun to experience his father as more supportive and accepting. He related that his father has attended his therapy sessions where Richard's sexuality is discussed and that his father has come to realize the emotional toll this process has taken on Richard. Reflecting on the progress that his father has made, Richard asserted, "I think even to this day he is not 100% comfortable with it, but I think he is trying very hard, and I think he will be one day[...] I don't think he loves me any less because I am gay[...] I think he still just needs some getting used to" (Interview C1).

Cindy was also asked to reflect on the process that she and her husband have gone through in terms of acknowledging and accepting Richard's sexuality after he disclosed his identity. Focusing on her husband's process, Cindy stated:

I honestly don't know, it's like a mystery to all of us. I don't know what happened to him. It's the strangest thing. I don't know if it's

he's seen me be so angry and crying, that he sees how important it is to me. You know, I don't know. I tell him how I feel like I failed Richard in second grade. That weighs on me. All I want is happiness for our family and happiness for our kids. I could never have him want to kill himself again over who he is. It's just horrible. I'm embarrassed by us that it got to that point. I don't know what it is with him. I mean can I say that he will be okay if Richard comes home with a guy? No, I don't know, I don't know how he'll be then. That will be the true "action speaks louder than words," you know. That will be the true, I think, test. But he surprised me a couple of weeks ago because Richard wanted to have a couple of friends over that he met at a group and he said, "Ma, one of them, one of them you definitely know that he is gay. I'm like, "Okay, have him come over. Come over and hang out." And he is like, "What do you think? Maybe we should ask dad?" So I said to John [Richard's father], "You know, I'm okay....I mean, if this is who Richard is hanging around with and these kids are nice kids, they're welcomed in our home." So John said, "Have them come on over." And I was surprised at that. But I think we were both so tired of seeing Richard hide that it doesn't matter to us anymore. (Interview C2)

Cindy went on to discuss how her husband, John, comes from a Sicilian Italian family, noting that John's father was a very "prejudiced man," and she identified his upbringing as a significant influence on the difficulties he initially had with accepting Richard's sexuality (Interview C2).

Richard also alluded to his grandfather as a "very judgmental" man and also identified his father's upbringing as the main influence on his father's discomfort (Interview C1). In terms of her own journey, Cindy also discussed how she has a brother who is gay, though he has never identified in that way. Cindy described feeling pained that her brother has been unable to embrace his identity, and she worried that Richard would endure the same fate. She stated:

My brother is gay, 50-years-old, and never has fully come out. And I watched him get tormented as a child. And I think seeing like my oldest brother getting treated that way, it was always the back of my mind. And then having my son getting treated that way, it was just, it was like overload of pain. (Interview C2)



From her description, it appeared that Cindy's association to homosexuality was a life of pain and rejection, and this was likely a significant influence on the feelings of protectiveness that she expressed for Richard.

Richard and Cindy also discussed how the family is planning to share Richard's sexual identity with his three younger brothers. When Richard was asked how it has been having his parents know about his sexuality but not his brothers, he responded:

When I want to talk about it with my mom because I am worried about it or because I am being anxious, I have to do it in secret or I have to say [to my brothers], "Can you please leave, I don't feel comfortable, I mean, I need you guys to leave so I can talk to my mom." And they get extremely annoyed with me that I am always kicking them out, so it's been really hard. (Interview C1)

Cindy stated that the family is planning to have a meeting with Richard's therapist, so he can share his sexuality with them. Cindy noted, though:

I did tell my son who is two years younger than [Richard] last summer that you know, "I feel like, you know, what you think about if Richard feels he could be gay. What do you think about that?" And he started to cry. And I was like, "What are you crying for?" And he was like, "I just feel bad for him." "What do you feel bad for him about?" His worry was the same as mine. "I just feel bad that he's got to deal with that with people that live around us. I said, "Well, you know whatever he's going through I just want you to be accepting of him because he's your brother and you love him and..." But I know that he's...sometimes he gets mad at him. And I think it's out of fear, I honestly do. I don't think he's mad because of sexuality. I think he's mad because now he has to protect him, or he gets more afraid for Richard in a sense. There are a bunch of assholes in our town, excuse my language. (Interview C2)

Cindy shared her hope that her sons will embrace Richard, and she described her vision of her family as her sons coming together each week for dinner and including Richard and his future partner. Believing that will occur, Cindy stated that her current journey involves releasing the fear she has for Richard and his safety as he moves on to college.

**Familial characteristics.** Richard and Cindy were both asked to consider what the qualities or strengths were of their family that helped contribute to a positive coming out process (see Appendix E; F). Richard focused primarily on the relationship he has with his mother, and he stated:

Well, especially with my mom, my mom is just a goodhearted person. She has been through a lot in her life, and just the fact...she is just...I don't know how to describe her. She is just like literally a perfect mom. She helps with like so much stuff. She is not selfish at all, and just, she is very giving. She will do anything for her kids. (Interview C1)

When prompted by the interviewer to consider the qualities and strengths of his whole family, Richard responded, "They don't give up. Like they could have kicked me out of the house or sent me to live with someone else, but they didn't give up ever[...] We're very close" (Interview C1).

When asked to identify what she felt are the characteristics of her family that helped facilitate the coming-out process, Cindy responded that she was unsure and that she could not speak for the rest of her family. She note for herself, though, that she has always been inspired by the amount of work that Richard has been exerting over the past few years to rebuild his health and grow in confidence. When asked about the strengths of her family, she responded: "I think that the boys have empathy. I do. They have always been the one that stick up for someone" (Interview C2). This may relate back to Cindy's earlier observation about her other son who felt protective of Richard and was concerned how others may treat him.

Within their narratives, Richard and Cindy alluded to a number of strengths and qualities that likely contributed in a positive manner to the coming out process. Richard's description of his family's strengths suggests a high level of familial cohesion, but it also alludes to qualities of persistence and loyalty that are particularly pertinent given Richard's psychological difficulties

as a youth. Cindy too had indicated that she believed Richard's father has been able to address his own discomfort by recognizing the distress that Richard was experiencing due to his internal conflict about his sexuality. A sense of protectiveness appears to pervade the family unit as even Richard's brother expressed concern about his mother discussed Richard's sexuality with him. A particularly salient theme for this family, especially for Richard and Cindy's relationship, was open communication. Cindy noted that she is actually working on helping Richard to develop a "filter" with her because he transparent with various aspects of his life (Interview C2). This relational quality, though, had likely been a vital aspect to Richard's ability to address his internal conflict and resolve some of his psychological struggles. Finally, Richard and Cindy's account of their religious and ethnic heritage indicated that they have faced significant cultural pressures against homosexuality, so their ability to challenge these cultural norms also suggested significant cognitive flexibility. It appeared that Richard's father has faced more difficulty with this task; however, Cindy's account suggested he has also been challenging deeply ingrained messages about masculinity and homosexuality. Cindy disclosed that she believed her parents' generation was focused on the sexual act of homosexuality rather than the love and relational nature of homosexuality. She expressed her belief that her husband has also begun to challenge this perspective as well.

**Prominent themes.** In reviewing the interviews from this study, particular themes became salient with regard to the nature of the coming out process and factors that contributed to familial responses. The themes that follow were particularly pertinent to Richard and Cindy's family and to the research questions that are being addressed in this study.

***Coming out in stages.*** In recalling the coming out process, Richard and Cindy indicated that it occurred in stages over a few years and that it is still ongoing. In Richard's case, he had

not chosen to disclose his sexuality, and in fact, he had not admitted to himself that he was gay. According to Richard, if his mother had not stumbled upon the pornography he had been viewing, he may never have disclosed his sexuality. When he was confronted, though, he described being confused and believing he was bisexual. He stated, “I thought that if I said I was bi and said I did like girls, it would be normal, and I just wanted to be normal” (Interview C1). It was some time before Richard could identify as gay and share this with his mother.

Having been hospitalized, Richard was then confronted with having to disclose his sexuality to his father during a family meeting. Again, Richard initially identified as bisexual as he continued to be conflicted about his sexuality. Experiencing a romantic attraction to another patient, Richard was again compelled to address his sexuality with his father who often appeared uncomfortable with Richard’s same-sex attractions. Later experiencing rejection from a peer due to identifying as gay, Richard discussed how he attempted to act like he was straight and informed his parents he may be straight. It took time and psychological treatment before Richard could more confidently and comfortably identify as gay to himself and his family. The coming out process was not a straightforward or linear process for Richard; rather, it involved movement forward and backward. At the time of the interview, Richard and his family were planning to disclose his sexuality to his three younger brothers, marking another important step in the coming out process.

***Types of responses to coming out.*** A particularly salient theme for Richard’s family was the discrepant responses he experienced from his mother and father. Richard described his mother as “very supportive” as she stated that it was “normal” and “okay” and that she would always love Richard (Interview C1). Despite the gradual nature of Richard’s coming out process, there has been a continuous perception of support from Lisa. With regard to Richard’s

father, though, both Richard and Cindy described how difficult the process has been for John, Richard's father. Richard recalled that John looked shocked and physically uncomfortable despite saying that he would always love and accept Richard. Cindy also commented on how uncomfortable her husband looked, and she often reiterated that "actions speak louder than words," insinuating that John was saying he would be accepting but that it was unclear how true that was (Interview C2). Neither Richard nor Cindy suggested that John was initially rejecting of Richard, but both noted that he has become more overly accepting over time. Cindy recalled how surprised she was when John readily allowed Richard's gay friends to come over to their house. Richard noted that he is better able to sit with his father and discuss some issues related to his sexuality. At the time of the interview, it was unclear how John might react to Richard being in a relationship with a man, and Cindy alluded to that at the "true test" for her husband (Interview C2). Although Richard's experience of his father's reaction differed greatly from that of his mother's reaction, Richard did not describe his father's reaction as rejecting. Instead, he appeared to appreciate his discomfort and recognize that he has been working toward being more accepting.

***Psychological distress.*** Having considered his family's responses to him being gay, it also became evident that an important theme was Richard's own struggle to recognize and accept his sexuality and the impact it had on his psychological well-being. As Richard and Cindy detailed, Richard was hospitalized on an inpatient psychiatric ward about four times due to suicidal ideation and suicide attempts. Prior to Cindy confronting Richard about the pornography on his computer, Richard had been experiencing a significant amount of bullying at school, and Cindy noted his peers were calling him "faggot." Richard described being tortured by his feelings of attraction to men, noting that he would actively try to convince himself that he

was attracted to women. He poignantly stated, “I was like ready to like just go insane” (Interview C1). Considering what being gay meant to him at that time, Richard described feeling that he would be forced to live a life of loneliness and unhappiness as he would be unable to have the things he dreamed of, like getting married and having children.

As Richard began to grapple with his sexual identity with his family, he found himself attracted to another patient which appeared to provide confirmation that he was gay. He felt compelled to share this with other individuals and chose one of his closest friends; however, this friend began to actively avoid Richard following this disclosure. Richard described how the emotional impact of this rejection caused him to again try to actively convince himself he was straight. This was followed by another hospitalization. As Cindy alluded to, it appeared that Richard’s psychological health was directly related to his ability to accept his sexual identity and live his life in accordance with that identity. Recently having his own views of homosexuality shift by attending a support group and meeting other gay individuals, Richard indicated having achieved a much higher level of psychological well-being and stability.

***Cultural influences.*** Considering the focus that occurred on Richard’s father, cultural factors became a salient topic as both Richard and Cindy emphasized John’s ethnic background and conservative upbringing. When asked to reflect on what contributed to some of John’s discomfort with Richard’s sexuality, Richard and Cindy quickly pointed to John’s upbringing by his father, whom they described as a “judgmental” and “prejudiced” man (Interview C1; Interview C2). Cindy noted that her father-in-law was a Sicilian Italian and that his family was working-class and not well-educated. She expressed her belief that this contributed to the significant amount of prejudice that the family expressed. From Richard’s perspective, Italian culture appeared to place a lot of emphasis on getting married and having children, and he

believed this inherently conflicted with being gay. Richard also noted that he did not know any gay Italians, so he imagined it would be hard for others to accept.

In addition to identifying potential negative views of homosexuality in Italian culture, Richard also described his father in terms that suggested issues of masculinity also influenced his father's reactions. Richard described his father as a "really tough guy" and "stereotypical-like jock," noting that his father works as a carpenter (Interview C2). These descriptions alluded to a preoccupation with images of masculinity, and Richard noted that his father is not a very sympathetic person which made him concern about sharing his sexuality with him. From Cindy's perspective, it appeared that John was fixated on the sexual nature of homosexuality rather than the relational aspects. This has changed, though, with greater exposure to different images of homosexuality.

***Exposure to homosexuality.*** Within both Richard's and Cindy's narratives it became clear that exposure to gay people and differing portrayals of homosexuality were important experiences for their family. Having discussed little to no exposure to gay people, Richard's conceptions about homosexuality centered around being lonely and having an unfulfilling life. When asked how this perspective has changed, Richard clearly identified meeting other gay people as a vital factor. He stated:

I started going to a group, and then I met a bunch of friends who are also gay[...] I've just been hanging out with them a lot and[...] they are the happiest, real people that you [will] ever meet[...] And just the fact I surround myself with them showed me that like I too could be like that and have it all and be happy. (Interview C1)

Despite years of psychological treatment, this exposure to gay people proved to be one of the most important factors in helping Richard challenge his notions about homosexuality.

In her narrative, Cindy discussed how her exposure to homosexuality began at a young age as her older brother was tormented over suspicions of being gay. She stated that he continues to deny his sexuality despite the fact that the entire family firmly believes he is gay. Cindy discussed how painful it had been for her to watch her brother hide his identity, and she feared the same thing would happen to Richard. Her experience of homosexuality as a dark secret that must be hidden from others and that exposes you to being tormented by others became a significant influence as Cindy has also been afraid of others mistreating Richard. She stated she has been working hard to relinquish these fears especially as Richard gets ready to leave for college.

Cindy also discussed how the media has helped her husband become exposed to different images of homosexuality. She stated that he refused to see movies like *Brokeback Mountain* as he did not want to see two men engaged in sexual acts; however, he has been significantly influenced by other cultural images that focus on the relational aspects of homosexuality. Alluding to *Modern Family* which is a comedy that depicts a middle-aged gay couple with an adopted child, Cindy stated, “I really think those shows had more of an impact on my husband than anything that I have said to him” (Interview C2). She added:

Oh he loves watching it, *Modern Family*. He gets a kick out of it and I think the more that you are able....you know he never had any friends that were gay. My husband or my father-in-law was never around anybody that was gay, so I think that they came up with their own twisted kind of ideas[...] I think they were introduced to thinking it was more of a sex thing instead of a love thing, and I think now my husband sees that it's about love and about feeling love and giving love. (Interview C2).

Like Richard, John seems to have been heavily influenced by being introduced to differing images of homosexuality that promote a more favorable image. It also appeared to be helpful for John to de-sexualize homosexuality in terms of working toward developing a more accepting



view of it. As Cindy alluded to earlier, it may be the image of Richard in a romantic relationship that will potentially strain John's ability to be open and accepting as the element of sexuality will be reintroduced.

### **Prominent Themes between Families**

Having looked at each family individually, the current analysis also focused on evaluating the consistency of themes between families. This inter-family analysis revealed that certain themes were consistent whereas others were not, and comparing each family allowed for a deeper understanding of the themes that were identified within each family. Although certain themes did appear within each family, they also manifested in unique ways, so these variations will be discussed within each theme.

**Coming out in stages.** For all three families, the coming out process occurred in multiple stages over a number of years, and for James, Andrew, and Richard, their initial disclosure was softened as they initially identified as bisexual, or even asexual in Andrew's case. Both James and Andrew alluded to "testing the waters," so their decision to soften their disclosure was seemingly motivated by a sense of uncertainty about how their family members would react. In Richard's case, though, his initial disclosure was unintentional and the result of his mother discovering gay pornography on his computer. At that time, he was still struggling to accept his sexuality, so his decision to identify as bisexual was seemingly also an attempt to assuage his own fears and anxieties.

Initially, James, Andrew, and Richard disclosed their sexuality to a single family member, and for James and Andrew, it was a conscious, deliberate decision. After that, though, the coming out process became not only a series of intentional disclosures but also unplanned discoveries. For James, his eldest sister and his father were told by his sister Amanda and his

mother, respectively. These were decisions that James' family made without his assent. In terms of his eldest sister, James' response included surprise and some disbelief, but when he learned his mother had told his father, he appeared to experience shock and dread as he was not ready for his father to know. For Andrew, his decision to be out in high school led to his sister discovering his sexual identity through peers. Andrew had maintained some fear that would occur, but he appeared more prepared for that likely possibility. Finally, Richard's mother also disclosed his identity to Richard's brother, and in a sense, she also appeared to be testing the waters for Richard, especially considering that the family is planning to share Richard's sexual identity with all three of his younger brothers.

Given the difference in ages between Richard, age 18, and James and Andrew, ages 25 and 26, their current places in the coming out process are likely impacted by their respective ages, as James and Andrew appeared to be enjoying their family's open acceptance and support. For Richard, he is still planning to disclose being gay to all of his siblings, he is still waiting for a greater sense of acceptance from his father, and he has only recently come to experience a sense of satisfaction with his sexual identity; however, both James and Andrew were not openly out to all of their family members until after their first year of college. In terms of chronological age and coming out, all three trajectories appeared similar, but when James and Andrew decided to disclose their sexual identity, they had achieved a sense of satisfaction and acceptance of their own sexual identity. Richard was navigating the coming out process while also trying to develop a sense of personal acceptance. This may explain some of the psychological difficulties that Richard was experiencing that were absent for both James and Andrew.

**Types of responses to coming out.** James, Andrew, and Richard experienced a variety of responses from their family members, including excitement, disbelief, discomfort, and

disappointment, but none of them experienced overtly rejecting or abusive responses which may explain why their coming out process has been a subjectively positive one. James noted in his narrative that he is thankful for his family as he has seen how other families respond poorly to a member being gay, and he stated, “Especially with my partner too, when I see how he had to deal with it with his family[...], it just boggles my mind” (Interview ). James’ sister Amanda described the most excited response as she appeared happy to have a brother who was gay and with whom she could discuss other guys. This was a unique response that was described about any other family member. A more common response involved family members affirming their continuous love and support. James’ eldest sister and one of his twin brothers evidenced this response, and Cindy also described a similar response as she affirmed her love for Richard and attempted to assuage his anxiety and panic.

A common parental response often included disappointment and discomfort, but these appeared to be related to the gender of the parent. James’ and Andrew’s mothers appeared focused on the loss of their dreams of their sons getting married and having grandchildren. They appeared to be mourning the loss of a “traditional” marriage. For Cindy, this appeared to be less of a focus, but when asked by the interviewer if she had experienced that sense of loss, Cindy responded, “I don’t think when I was pregnant, I was like, “Oh god, you know, I can’t wait for him to grow up and be gay.”[...] Your initial reaction is you want four kids that are going to[...] grow up, get married, have kids, but the regular...you know the marriage of what **I am**” (Interview C2). Cindy emphasized this last statement suggesting that parents are going to naturally want their kids to have what they had. For James’ and Richard’s fathers, there appeared to be a greater sense of discomfort with their sons being gay. Despite his father’s affirming words, Richard could sense his father’s physical discomfort, and for James’ father,

Amanda's account indicated that he was initially quite uncomfortable with James being gay. With regard to his father, Andrew stated he had not had the desire to tell his father about his sexuality, but he noted that he has considered it more due to his relationship. He described being uncertain of how his father would respond, but he noted his mother has discouraged it, suggesting some familial concern.

Finally, James' brother and Richard's sister had strong emotional responses that appeared to reflect both feelings of disbelief and confusion. James' younger brother expressed his feeling that James had been lying to him, and he was confused about how his brother's sexuality would impact their ability to relate. For Renee, she initially responded with disbelief and also appeared overwhelmed at the suggestion that her brother was not part of the "norm." Both siblings were young when they first learned about their older siblings' sexuality, so a lack of awareness about homosexuality may have contributed to their initial responses.

**Expressions of acceptance.** Having discussed initial familial reactions to James', Andrew's, and Richard's disclosures, an analysis of all three families revealed that expressions of acceptance was a particularly salient theme for James' and Andrew's families and likely an emerging theme in Richard's family. In recalling moments when they felt that their respective families had come to recognize and accept their sexuality, both James and Andrew described memories that revealed both subtle and overt expressions of acceptance. For James, subtle expressions occurred in the maintenance and stability of family interactions. His parents maintained a sense of protectiveness about his safety and well-being indicating that his identity as their son had not changed because his sexual orientation seemingly had. James and Amanda also noted how the family often uses humor to connect, and the family has expressed their comfort by making jokes about James' sexual identity

In terms of overt expressions, James and Andrew discussed how their sisters were interested in going to gay bars with their respective brothers, and Andrew noted that his mother had also gone to a gay bar with him for his birthday and that she inquires about trips that Andrew takes with his gay friends. These expressions appeared to represent a desire to support James and Andrew by participating in the social realm of their sexual identity. This theme was also alluded to by Richard's mother who described her surprise that her husband allowed Richard's friends who were gay to come to their home. For Cindy, though, this was a clear distinction from her husband supporting the relational and sexual aspects of Richard's sexual identity. This type of acceptance had been addressed in James' and Andrew's families.

In terms of acknowledging and supporting the relational and sexual aspects of being gay, James and Richard also discussed how their families have engaged in overt and subtle expressions of acceptance. James recalled how his mother caught him looking at an attractive man crossing the street and then expressed her agreement that the man was very physically attractive. The importance of this memory appeared to reside in the acknowledgment of the sexual nature of homosexuality, which James may have presumed would be the most difficult part for his mother. Over time, James' family has been open about inquiring about his boyfriend and welcoming him into their home. These overt expressions of acceptance appeared to focus more on the relational aspect of James' identity. Andrew recalled how his mother comforted him following a break-up and openly acknowledged he was dating a man and that she believed he would find the right man. This was initially conveyed, though, in the simple use of the word "he." Also appearing to be an acknowledgment of the relational nature of Andrew's sexual identity, it was a subtle, yet crucial, expression of acceptance for Andrew. Andrew's sister had also been openly engaging in this expression of acceptance as she actively expressed her desire

to spend more time with Andrew and his boyfriend. Overt expressions of acceptance appeared to become more prominent over the course of the coming out process for some family members.

**Cultural influences.** A particularly salient theme for James' and Richard's family was the influence of cultural factors, like their ethnic heritage and religiosity, on their families' responses. James and his sister discussed how their parents' emigration from the Philippines caused them to consider their reactions within a cultural context. They both identified the Philippines as a country that is heavily influenced by Roman Catholicism, so they viewed their parents' upbringing as conservative and traditional. Richard and his mother discussed similar themes as they reflected on John's initial discomfort; however, they also focused on the prejudiced nature of John's upbringing being a reflection of a middle-class Sicilian Italian family that lacked education and exposure to different cultures.

For Andrew's family, this topic was less salient. Unlike James and Richard, Andrew's family had been living in the States for a number of generations, so this may be a reflection of the acculturation process. Andrew, though, noted that cultural concerns may be a bigger concern for his extended family rather than his immediately family. He stated:

I was baptized in the Catholic Church. My aunt, my Mom's oldest sister, became very involved in Christianity [Protestantism]. Her son is also gay, so I have an older cousin who is gay. And when he came out to his mom, he did it in a letter to his mom. Where he left the letter, his mom left Christian books about being gay and how it was wrong and stories about how Christians overcame those feelings. So I definitely think in some of the older generations of my family[...] I think religion played a big part, but never with my Mom so much. I attribute that just to the fact that my Mom is younger. (Interview B1)

This statement suggested that even within his mother's family there is differing level of adherence to more traditional, religious values. Noting that her oldest sibling is twelve years older than her, Lisa confirmed that her older siblings are "very religious" and had little exposure

to alternate lifestyles (Interview B2). Although religious factors appeared less salient in terms of the immediate family's response to Andrew being gay, it became more salient as the family considered their extended family.

**Exposure to homosexuality.** Another theme that was addressed for all three families was the level and type of exposure that individual had to homosexuality and its influence on familial reactions. The narrative suggested that individuals who had no exposure to gay people or positive images of homosexuality were more distressed, and multiple individuals evidenced this response. Renee noted that most of her distress was related to her perception that homosexuality was abnormal, and she stated she had never met a gay person before she learned about her brother's sexuality. Andrew's mom was affected by her perception of homosexuality as a promiscuous lifestyle that results in contracting HIV or being alone. Richard's father was described as having no exposure to gay people and as being heavily influenced by his father's prejudiced nature, and Richard was also negatively impacted by his lack of exposure to gay people. He described believing that being gay meant he would be unable to live a happy, fulfilling life. For each of these individuals, being exposed to gay people or to positive representations of homosexuality in the media was vital in helping them challenge their initial distress or discomfort and develop a more accepting stance. For Renee, Lisa, and Richard, this meant meeting gay people, but for Richard's father this meant seeing positive representations on television.

Prior exposure to gay people or to positive images of homosexuality did not preclude feelings of discomfort, though. James believed that his mother having a close friend who was gay would allow her to readily accept his sexuality, but she also experienced a certain level of

surprise and discomfort. He stated he understood that it must be different having a son who is gay, but he was also surprised by his mother's response.

Having perhaps the most positive responses, Amanda and Cindy did appear to have been influenced by their previous exposure to gay people. Amanda described having co-workers who were gay and meeting actors who were gay, and she alluded to a greater sense of normalcy and comfort with interacting with gay individuals. As a sibling, it may be that she also did not have expectations about the life James was going to lead the way their mother did. For Cindy, she was significantly impacted by her older brother's experiences of being tormented by others for being gay. She was distressed by his decision to hide his sexuality, and she feared Richard would live the same life. This may explain her conscious decision to be as supportive as possible and to also be highly protective of Richard. Overall, this was a particularly salient theme for all three families.



## Chapter V: Discussion

This study was designed to obtain a deeper understanding of the coming out process from a family's perspective and to learn about this process from families who endorsed experiencing a positive outcome. Focusing on the experience of gay males who are in the state of emerging adulthood, this study included three ethnically-diverse families who described when and how their family member disclosed his sexual identity and how their family has navigated that process over time. Conducting analyses of each family's narratives and comparing each family's narratives to each other, five prominent themes emerged from the results of this study. These themes included: (a) coming out in stages, (b) types of responses to coming out, (c) expressions of acceptance, (d) cultural influences, and (e) exposure to homosexuality. These themes are discussed within the context of the current research literature. Implications and suggestions for future research will then be discussed.

### Coming Out in Stages

**Relationship to sexual minority identity development.** In evaluating the coming out process for these three families, it was first evident that coming out to one's family was usually a deliberate decision and usually a consequence of identity achievement. In Richard's case, though, he was pressured into confronting and disclosing his feelings of same-sex attraction after his mother had discovered same-sex pornography on his computer. At the time, he was still experiencing a significant amount of intra-psychic conflict about his feelings of attraction to men as he viewed homosexuality as a life doomed to loneliness and unhappiness. In fact, he was actively disavowing his feelings of same-sex attraction as these feelings conflicted with his inherent desire to be heterosexual. This cognitive dissonance, inner turmoil, and use of denial all

suggested Richard was at the very beginning stages of identity development, which is a time when identity disclosure does not typically occur (Cass, 1984; Troiden, 1988).

For James and Andrew, though, their decisions to disclose their sexual identity followed the recognition of having a homosexual identity. Their development of a sexual minority identity appeared to occur without any feedback from others about their sexual identity, which is consistent with theorists who suggest that identity disclosure is not a requirement for the progression of identity development (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Although Troiden (1988) suggested that identity disclosure would likely occur in late adolescence as individuals grappled with a sense of confusion about their same-sex attraction throughout adolescence, James and Andrew had readily identified as gay by early adolescence. Consistent with stage/phase models, though, James and Andrew still occupied a stage where individuals are heavily influenced by the reactions of others (Cass, 1984; McCarn and Fassinger, 1996; Troiden, 1988). Both James and Andrew described “testing the waters” by first coming out to friends. After receiving positive feedback, they appeared to feel more secure about their sexual identity and about their decision to share it with their family member.

**Softening the disclosure.** Although both James and Andrew had received positive feedback from their peers about their sexual identity as gay men, both individuals were unable to identify as gay and instead chose to identify as asexual or bisexual, which according to Andrew was a way to “test the waters” and gauge his mother’s initial response (Interview B1). James described feeling that being bisexual might be perceived as less “bad” (Interview ). Richard stated he also chose to identify as bisexual, but he noted this was related to his own desire to be “normal,” feeling that as long as he was also attracted to women he could be normal (Interview C1, 2013). In their social-cognitive-behavioral model related to coming out to one’s family,

Crosbie-Burnett, Foster, Murray, and Bowen (1996) suggest that coming out to one's family can occur incrementally, meaning an individual can disclose their identity to one person at a time. James, Andrew, and Richard appeared to add another layer to this incremental disclosure by only revealing part of their identity. Considering Richard's comment that by identifying as bisexual he could still be attracted to women and be perceived as normal, the disclosure of being bisexual may be largely motivated by the desire to still lay claim to heteronormativity if a family member should have a negative response (Herek, 2004). Lisa's narrative suggested that this was the impact Andrew's disclosure as bisexual had on her as she could still hope and pray that he was straight. Lisa may have been suggesting that even as a bisexual man Andrew could still live a heterosexual life of marrying a woman, having a traditional marriage, and having children.

**Incremental disclosure.** For James, Andrew, and Richard, disclosing their sexual identity occurred in various stages over a number of years, indicating the use of incremental disclosures (Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996). Whereas James first disclosed his sexuality to his sister, Andrew and Richard first came-out to their mothers, but all three disclosed to their mothers before their fathers, which is consistent with the research (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; D'Augelli et al., 1998; Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998). James' and Richard's narratives suggested there were significant concerns about their fathers' potential reactions. Describing the reasons for his concerns, James cited his father's use of the word "faggot" and his statements that he would disown and eject his other sons from the home if they were gay. Unlike James who cited specific anti-gay comments made by his father, Richard indicated that he just did not perceive his father as someone who was open with his feelings or very tolerant of others. McCarn and Fassinger (1996) suggested that oppressive climates, like a household, can significantly influence an individual's decision to disclose their sexual identity, but in this

case, specific individuals were identified as either tolerant or oppressive. Incremental disclosures are thus likely a reflection of one's perception of another's level of tolerance and openness.

Coming out in stages also appeared to have an impact on familial dynamics as some members were pulled into secret-keeping. Describing how the discloser can request a family member to keep their secret, Crosbie-Burnett et al. (1996) suggest this can generate feelings of anxiety for the secret-holder and threaten familial cohesion. In Richard's case, though, it was actually his mother who first encouraged not telling Richard's father. Cindy described regretting this decision because she not only had to keep a secret from her husband but also felt that she was unwittingly sending the message that Richard's sexuality should be a secret. Richard's father was angry when he learned that his wife had known before him, suggesting that she had violated the rules of their relationship by secret-holding. It appears that incremental disclosures may not only induce feelings of anxiety and confusion for disclosers and secret-holders but also feelings of hurt and anger for those who are outside the new subgroup of discloser and secret-holder. This may be especially true when a group like the parental subsystem is divided by secret-holding. Of course, the discloser may also experience feelings of anger when the secret-holder does not maintain their confidentiality. James shared his surprise when he learned his mother had told his father that he was gay, and he recalled that one of his first thoughts was considering his mother a "traitor," suggesting some feelings of anger (Interview). His sister Amanda also disclosed his sexuality to their eldest sister without James' assent, and he described feeling surprised then too. What is unclear is whether or not James explicitly asked his sister or his mother to maintain his confidence. Family members have been found to be uncertain about the exact nature of a discloser's desires or expectations in terms of secret-holding (Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996). Overall, it appears that incremental disclosures can introduce anxiety and

frustration into the family, but individuals may be using this as a strategy to test the family's reactions, suggesting that initial familial reactions may be highly influential in terms of whether or not an individual continues to disclose to other family members.

### **Types of Responses to Coming Out**

In reviewing the initial reactions of each family member to the coming out process, it became evident there was a spectrum of responses that fell into a few categories, including: (a) excitement, (b) affirmation of love and support, (c) disappointment, and (d) shock, discomfort, and confusion. In establishing these categories it is important to note that they are not mutually exclusive as individuals' responses will include elements of multiple categories. Perhaps the most important element of these responses is the lack of rejecting, abusive responses. The importance of this will be discussed at the end of this section.

**Excitement.** James' sister Amanda described the most excited response, appearing genuinely happy to have a brother with whom she can discuss men and their attractiveness. Considering his initial disclosure, James noted how interested Amanda seemed in his life as a bisexual man; however, Amanda described a similar response when James later identified as gay. This type of exuberant response has not been captured in the current literature on familial responses to coming out, with most research emphasizing an initial response of shock and denial (Baptist & Allen, 2008; Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Ben-Ari, 1995; Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996; DeVine, 1984; Fields, 2001; Holtzen & Agresti, 1990; Robinson et al., 1989; Saltzburg, 2004; Savin-Williams & Dubé, 1998). It was the only response of its kind in this study, but it may provide information about potential reactions from siblings. Whereas parents have often expressed the pain related to the loss of their inherent dream that their child would be heterosexual, get married, and have grandchildren (Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Crosbie-Burnett et

al., 1996; Saltzburg, 2004; Savin-Williams & Dubé, 1998), it may be that siblings have less psychological investment in this heteronormative assumption leading to less internal conflict. Amanda's response is also likely reflective of a general sense of openness and lack of prejudice. Baptist and Allen (2008) detail how one parent's response that included "shock, confusion, and resistance" were related to feelings of homophobia, so Amanda's response suggests a lack of homophobia and a genuine sense of openness to alternative lifestyles. This openness appeared related to her positive exposure to homosexuality, which will be detailed in a later section.

**Affirmation of love and support.** Although it's likely that various responses included affirmations of love and support, this response style was particularly notable in Richard's mother and in James' eldest sister and one of his younger brothers. Richard recalled his mother saying, "It's normal; it's okay. I still love you more than everybody and everything in the world" (Interview C1). Cindy related that at the time she felt "bad and scared" because of how frightened Richard seemed and because of the bullying he had been experiencing (Interview C2). Cindy's perception of Richard's distress and inner turmoil appeared to elicit her affirmations of love and support. Beeler & DiProva (1999) found that families can experience feelings of sadness related to the perception that their family member will have a difficult life; however, Cindy's feelings of sadness appeared directly related to the distress she could see Richard was and had been experiencing. Any concerns about an imagined future of Richard getting married and having children appeared to be trumped by maternal concern for Richard's psychological well-being. In addition to other aspects of their narrative, Cindy's comforting response to Richard's distress suggests a relatively secure attachment style, which has been found to be correlated with disclosure (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). A secure attachment style may also be a correlate of comforting, supportive responses to disclosure.

This initial response style was also found in two of James' siblings. It is unclear from the narratives what prompted this response, but Amanda did allude to her eldest sister as someone who focuses on being loving and accepting of all people. Although it is not possible to glean from the current data, it would be helpful to know James' sister's perception of homophobia and heterosexism as her affirmations of love and support may be a reflection of her understanding of negative attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality that have been propagated within society and a desire to contradict those attitudes (Herek, 2004). Similar to Cindy, James' siblings' affirmations of love and support may reflect positive, secure relationships within the family.

**Disappointment.** Another common response for individuals was the loss of the inherent dream of their family member having a "traditional" marriage and having grandchildren, but this response was exclusively found in the mothers of the subjects. In particular, James' and Andrew's mothers expressed the loss of their dreams of their sons getting married and having grandchildren. Although this was a less salient theme for Cindy, she noted that she of course imagined her four sons marrying women and having grandchildren. This loss was a common theme in the available research (Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996; Robinson et al., 1989; Saltzburg, 2004), and it appears to be a reflection of heteronormativity, which is described as the "mundane production of heterosexuality as the normal, natural, taken-for-granted sexuality" (Kitzinger, 2005, p. 148). All three family narratives, including two of the mothers' actual accounts, describe how they inherently imagined and assumed their sons would marry women and have children. Their sons' disclosures represented the first time this vision was questioned and challenged.

For these mothers, this vision has not been eliminated but rather altered. Cindy and Lisa explicitly described how their sons could still marry, have children, and live happy lives, though

it may be with a different spouse than they initially imagined. Over time, they were able to accommodate their sons' sexuality into their parental vision. This ability to alter one's cognitive schema has been identified as an important factor for families in order to be accepting (Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996). For mothers, the altered schema may be primarily restricted to the parental vision of getting married and having children; thus, the disappointment leads to feelings of sadness as mothers experience a sense of loss (Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996; Robinson et al., 1989; Saltzburg, 2004). This study's results suggested that fathers experience a different process.

**Shock, discomfort, and confusion.** The final common response appeared to be a mixture of shock, discomfort, and confusion. Although the responses and experiences of the fathers in this study are being provided by family members, the consistency in the narratives of each family suggested a basic level of interpretability. For Richard's father, John, there appeared to be a significant level of shock and discomfort in response to Richard's disclosure. Both Richard and Cindy described how shocked, physically rigid, and uncomfortable John became despite his verbal statements that he would always accept and love Richard. Both Richard and Cindy attributed this type of reaction to John's upbringing by a prejudiced father, suggesting John was maintaining his own homophobic beliefs. This echoed similar findings by Baptist and Allen (2008) who captured the narrative of a father who directly linked his discomfort and distress to his own homophobic upbringing. Rather than experiencing feelings of sadness related to the loss of a dream for one's child, fathers may experience shock and discomfort as they are confronted by their own homophobic beliefs and attitudes. This hypothesis can also be gleaned from the account of James' father's reaction. James recalled his father's use of the word "faggot" and his assertion that he would disown his other sons if they were gay, and Amanda recalled her father



alluding to James' sexuality as "not right" (Interview B2). Like John, James' father also went some time without discussing his son's sexual identity. In comparing types of responses, these paternal reactions appear to be a reflection of each individual's homophobia whereas the disappointment category and maternal reactions appeared to be the result of heteronormativity. It may be that homophobia represents a more deeply entrenched cognitive schema that requires greater time to challenge and alter.

Lastly, James' younger brother and Andrew's sister, Renee, also evidenced responses that not only included shock but also confusion. Both individuals had a very emotional response to learning that their older sibling was gay. James' brother disclosed an intense amount of confusion, noting his feeling that James had been lying about who he was, and Renee instantly denied these allegations by her peers. For Renee, her perception of homosexuality as abnormal appeared to be the driving force behind this response, so she too was confronted with her own inherent negative beliefs about homosexuality. Being young siblings may have also contributed to their responses as their exposure to positive images of homosexuality was limited.

**Lack of rejecting and abusive responses.** In reviewing the responses of these three families to the coming out process, it is important to note that no member evidenced an overtly rejecting or abusive response. This is an important finding given that parental rejection has been shown to be significantly associated with various negative outcomes for gay youth (D'Augelli, 2002; D'Augelli et al., 2001, 2005a, 2006; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009). The experience of familial rejection or abuse would likely have made it difficult for any of these families to describe a relatively positive experience with regard to the coming out process. For Richard, his psychological difficulties, including depression and suicidal ideation, appeared to be

related to peer rejection and his internal rejection of his sexual identity, suggesting that the early stages of identity development are a psychologically vulnerable time.

Although no individual was rejecting or abusive, only one family member, Amanda, described a response of excitement about their family member being gay; however, James, Andrew, and Richard did not identify or conceptualize their families' shock, disbelief, confusion, or disappointment as rejecting. This is an important finding as the simple lack of a rejecting or abusive response was a positive experience and helped contribute to a positive resolution of the coming out process. Gay individuals are likely not anticipating reactions of joy and appear prepared for reactions like shock and discomfort. Richard noted his father's discomfort and how he believed it was difficult for his father to hear he was gay; however, this was not interpreted as a personal rejection. Rather, his friend's withdrawal following his identity disclosure was interpreted as a clear rejection, causing Richard to try act straight and ultimately leading to another hospitalization. This latter finding reiterated the deleterious effects of peer rejection (Almeida et al., 2009). Despite the wide range of initial responses within these three families, the lack of rejecting or abusive responses was a strong, consistent finding.

### **Expressions of Acceptance**

Having discussed how individuals did not appear to expect initial responses of joy or excitement, James', Andrew's, and Richard's narratives suggested that they were looking for signs that their families had come to accept their sexuality. For these individuals, acceptance was expressed in various manners and with varying degrees of explicitness, but overall, they appeared to be looking for evidence that their family was recognizing their sexual identity and integrating it into the family system. These expressions of acceptance also appeared to be related to two differing aspects of one's sexual minority identity: the social and the sexual/relational.

**Expressions of acceptance of social identity.** In considering the social aspects of a sexual minority identity, family members appeared to be acknowledging the existence of gay and lesbian individuals and recognizing it as a valid identity with its own cultural norms. Reflecting on expressions of acceptance, James and Andrew both noted how their family members, specifically their sisters and moms, had been open to going to gay bars or attending gay pride festivals. Beeler and DiProva (1999) described this familial process as *exposure to gays and lesbians living “gay and lesbian lives”* (p. 449). Attending gay pride festivals or gay bars appeared to be an acknowledgment of the social expression of a gay identity and of group membership, which has been identified as a critical aspect of a sexual minority identity (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). James and Andrew appeared to be identifying the importance of having this aspect of their lives as gay men be acknowledged and embraced by their family members. Their family members’ active participation also represented movement from an abstract understanding of their sexual identity (Beeler & DiProva, 1999), echoing Cindy’s assertion that “actions speak louder than words” (Interview C2). Reflecting on her own evaluation of her husband’s ability to accept Richard’s sexuality, Cindy identified her husband’s willingness to have Richard’s gay friends come to their house as very significant because it represented a concrete step toward acknowledging a part of Richard’s life as a gay man. This step of *including gay and lesbian friends in the family* has been identified as an important theme for families navigating the coming out process and is reiterated by the current data (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). Cindy noted, though, that allowing gay friends to come to their home did not suggest to her that her husband would be okay with meeting someone that Richard was dating. This caveat alludes to the distinction between the social and sexual/relational aspects of being gay.

**Expressions of acceptance of sexual/relational identity.** Although James and Andrew noted the importance of having their social identity as gay men be acknowledged, the moments they identified as indications that their family had come to accept their identity appeared to focus on the sexual and relational aspects of their identity. James described how his mother's ability to recognize and affirm his physical attraction to another man represented a significant expression of acceptance. Andrew identified an important expression of acceptance as his mother's ability to console him following the end of a romantic relationship and to acknowledge that he had been in a relationship with a man and would find another man who could make him happy. Within both of these memories, there is a clear acknowledgment of James and Andrew as men who are attracted to men and as men who want to be in an intimate relationship with another man. This mere acknowledgment represented a significant expression of acceptance, but over time, family members also demonstrated an ability to actively integrate their member's gay identity into the family.

Having both been in intimate relationships at the time of the interviews, James and Andrew also discussed how their boyfriends had been welcomed into the home and treated as legitimate partners in their lives. This seemed to truly reflect each family's ability to accept their member's gay identity as they appeared to be recognizing James' and Andrew's future of being in a relationship with a man, indicating that they had altered their expectations of having a heterosexual family member who would marry an opposite-sex partner. Beeler & DiProva (1999) identified this process as the development of *alternate visions of the future*, which is seemingly related to another process of *making homosexuality less exotic*. In essence, a sign of acceptance is the decreasing differentiation between homosexual and heterosexual family members (Beeler & DiProva, 1999); thus, a homosexual family member's intimate relationship

is recognized and treated in the same manner as a heterosexual family member's intimate relationship. James alluded to this sense of integration by describing how his family had become comfortable making lighthearted jokes about him being gay, noting that humor is a fundamental way his family connects with each other. To James, having his family avoid using humor about his sexuality would suggest an inability to accept and integrate his sexuality into typical familial interactions.

The individuals in this study appeared to be quite sensitive to signs that their families were working to accept their sexuality, and the narratives suggested that acceptance occurred in stages. The most poignant example of this is seen in Richard's narrative as he described how his father was on a journey toward acceptance. Cindy's account suggested that John had begun to accept the social aspects of Richard's identity but that it is unclear how he will respond to the sexual and relational aspects of his identity. Richard noted his father had appeared very uncomfortable when he disclosed being attracted to a male patient. It may be that family members are more readily able to accept the social aspects of a member's sexual identity, like having gay and lesbian friends. What makes an individual more or less able to accept either aspects of sexual minority identity is likely related to a number of cultural factors that were identified in this study.

### **Cultural Influences**

Having reviewed the coming out process, including initial responses by family members and markers of acceptance over time, it is important to now consider what influenced these responses and processes. In reviewing the narratives of these three families, it became clear that various cultural factors made significant contributions to the overall process, including: ethnic

heritage and religiosity, and that these processes were influenced by each individual's level of acculturation.

Previous studies that have interviewed families noted that one limitation was the lack of culturally-diverse participants as Caucasian, middle-class samples were consistently used (Baptist & Allen, 2008; Beeler & DiProva, 1999). In the current study, Filipino-American, Mexican-American, and Italian-American families were interviewed, with each family maintaining a different level of acculturation, and these families were recruited from distinct geographical locations in the United States, namely Southern California and the New England area. As James, Andrew, and Richard identified factors that contributed to their family's responses to their sexual identity, it became clear that ethnicity, immigration, and acculturation were prominent factors for all three families

Identifying as Filipino, James related that his parents had emigrated from the Philippines, and he and his sister noted that they had consciously evaluated their parents' reactions to James' sexuality within the context of their conservative and traditional upbringing. James and Amanda framed their parents' conservative upbringing as directly related to the dominating influence of Roman Catholicism in the Philippines. James asserted that the message his parents received about homosexuality was that "it's wrong" and that "you can go to hell" (Interview ). For Amanda, her parents' ability to accept James' sexuality was a reflection of their acculturation status, noting that they had immigrated in 1968 and had become "Americanized" over time (Interview A2). As the first American-born generation, James and Amanda had developed a clear distinction between the deeply religious and traditional nature of the Philippines and the seemingly more liberal United States. Research has shown some positive changes in societal views of homosexuality in Western culture, as evidenced by changes in legislation and increased

visibility in the media (Ahmad & Bhurga, 2010; Bronski, 2011). James' and Amanda's narratives suggested that these changes may represent a stark difference between the United States and other countries that are significantly influenced by conservative religious views. Of course, James' and Amanda's local community in Southern California may also represent a more liberal culture, as suggested by the mere presence of gay bars and gay pride festivals that James attended along with some family members.

For Richard and Cindy, their Italian heritage represented the main influence on John's discomfort with Richard's sexuality. Noting that John's father was from Sicily, Cindy described her husband's family as working-class and lacking in formal education. She stated this was the primary contributor to her father-in-law's prejudiced nature as he was uninterested in exposing himself to different cultures or ideas. Describing his father as a "really tough guy" and "stereotypical-like jock," Richard's narrative also suggested that his father's upbringing generated particular messages about masculinity and that these likely conflicted with his views of homosexuals. Perhaps reflective of his own internalized view of gay men as feminine, Richard appeared to assume his father was uncomfortable with homosexuality as it must contradict his views on masculinity, though parents have been shown to respond negatively to gender atypical behaviors which are interpreted as a sign of homosexuality (D'Augelli et al., 2005b; 2006). This emphasis on concepts about masculinity was a stark contrast to the narrative of James and Amanda who emphasized that religious beliefs influenced the conservative nature of the Philippines. For both families, though, each generation represented a move away from rigid beliefs about religion or masculinity, suggesting acculturation mitigated the risk of rejection.

Acculturation was also a prominent theme for Andrew's family as he and Lisa both identified older generations as more religiously conservative or rigid. For Lisa, the twelve-year age gap between her and her oldest sibling represented a generational shift, describing her elder siblings as very religious and resistant to alternative lifestyles. If acculturation is being identified as a protective factor, it is necessary to understand what individuals are acculturating to, meaning what are the current socio-cultural messages about homosexuality. The narratives in this study suggested that the representations individuals maintained about homosexuality were related to their personal exposure to homosexuality at the macro and micro level.

Before discussing representations related to homosexuality, though, it should be noted that cultural factors related to each family's ethnic heritage also appeared to represent protective factors. With all three families coming from collectivistic cultures, there appeared to be an emphasis on the family unit and family loyalty. Andrew noted that his family's mantra was "we are all we have," underscoring the importance of family, and James and Amanda also described how important maintaining the family bond is. Although there may have been competing cultural norms related to religiosity and masculinity, cultural norms related to family loyalty appeared to serve as a protective factor for each family. As will be discussed in the later section on common familial characteristics, this emphasis on the family bond may be particularly important as families navigate the coming out process over time.

### **Exposure to Homosexuality**

Each individual discussed how their beliefs and attitudes about homosexuality were directly related to their personal exposure to gay people and to media representations of homosexuality, and for certain family members, exposure produced positive changes with regard to their attitudes about homosexuality.



**Exposure to gay people.** In reviewing the narratives, it became clear that some family members had no exposure to actual gay people prior to their family member coming out, leaving them vulnerable to negative societal attitudes about homosexuality. Andrew's sister, Renee, disclosed how her lack of exposure to gay people had left her to believe that homosexuality was abnormal, perhaps even wrong. Unable to identify the origins of these beliefs, it appears that larger societal attitudes about homosexuality had influenced Renee's attitudes about homosexuality. Kitzinger's (2005) description of heteronormativity elucidates how the readily assumed position of heterosexuality as "normal" and "natural" inherently defines homosexuality as abnormal and unnatural. Having never been exposed to gay individuals, Renee was seemingly rooted in a culture that espoused heteronormativity. Moving schools, a sub-culture, Renee was able to meet a variety of culturally-diverse individuals, including gay people, allowing her to consciously challenge her belief system. This hypothesis about the role of heteronormativity is underscored by Amanda's narrative as her description of having consistent interactions with gay people through work suggested that her definition of "normal" included homosexuality.

In addition to challenging attitudes related to heteronormativity, exposure to gay people also helped individuals challenge negative beliefs about homosexuality. Richard described how his personal struggle with his sexuality was related to his belief that he would be forced to live a lonely life, which is a belief that families have also been shown to maintain (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). His attendance at an LGBT support group and subsequent interaction with gay people who were happy allowed Richard to develop a whole new perspective on the lives of gay people. As models of sexual minority identity development would suggest, Richard's development of a positive self-image was contingent upon positive interactions with other gay people (Cass, 1984; Troiden, 1988). Without these interactions, Richard was only able to engage his schemas of

homosexuality as an unfulfilling life. This individual development mirrors the developmental trajectory of the family who is also forced to confront their preconceptions of homosexuality, become exposed to new experiences of homosexuality, and develop new visions of the future (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). For some family members, though, media representations were the most significant influences on attitudes about homosexuality.

**Media representations of homosexuality.** For some individuals, media representations of homosexuality contributed to initial negative beliefs, but for others, media representations allowed them to develop more positive perceptions of homosexuality. Lisa described how her initial concerns for Andrew were related to her perception of homosexuality as a promiscuous lifestyle that led to contracting HIV. She noted that this was the reference people often made when discussing homosexuality, including on the news. This type of parental concern has been documented since the beginning of the AIDS epidemic (Ben-Ari, 1995; Robinson et al., 1989), and it may remain a concern for parents given the significant risk of contracting HIV through male-to-male sexual contact (CDC, 2010). For Lisa, exposure to actual gay people allowed her to develop a more comprehensive view of homosexuality, but for Richard's father, exposure to positive media representations have reportedly been helpful in helping him develop an alternative perspective of homosexuality.

In describing her husband's journey of accepting Richard's sexuality, Cindy emphasized how the sexual aspects of homosexuality were particularly difficult for him to acknowledge. She noted that he refused to see the movie *Brokeback Mountain* because of the explicit sexual nature between the two main characters; however, he has reportedly become more cognizant of the relational aspects of homosexuality by watching *Modern Family* which is a television comedy show that depicts a middle-aged gay couple with an adopted child. She identified this television

show as having the most positive influence on her husband. Noting that John never had any gay friends, Cindy hypothesized that her husband was able to gain a new perspective on the loving aspects of homosexuality rather than focusing on the sexual aspects, which she suggested her husband may also have “twisted” ideas about (Interview C2). These narratives underscore previous studies that have documented the power the media has in shaping societal attitudes (Ahmad & Bhugra, 2010; Bronski, 2011), and Lisa’s and Cindy’s accounts suggest that the media can help develop both positive and negative representations.

### **Common Characteristics**

Having detailed some common themes and processes that occur for families, this study is also interested in identifying and understanding common familial characteristics that contribute to a positive coming out experience. Each individual was asked to identify their family’s strengths, and two prominent characteristics emerged: (a) familial cohesion and (b) open communication. In reviewing the narratives, another set of characteristics emerged: (c) flexibility and adaptability. These three characteristics will be discussed within the current literature.

**Familial cohesion.** Heatherington and Lavner (2008) indicate that family cohesion has been one of the most researched variables in regards to the disclosure process, but this variable facilitates varying outcomes. For instance, positive relations were not found to be a significant predictor of identity disclosure to parents (Waldner & Magruder, 1999), but a secure attachment style has been shown to be correlated with higher rates of disclosure to the family (Holtzen, et al., 1995). These seemingly contradictory findings were underscored by the current data, though. James and Andrew described a desire to disclose their sexuality to their family, but they also experienced a significant amount of anxiety. Although they did not anticipate overt rejections,

both softened their disclosure, and by doing so, softened the threat to their familial relationships. They described it as “testing the waters,” underscoring the uncertainty they maintained about their family’s responses. James noted that some part of him was afraid of losing the great relationship he had with his sister, and Andrew described how his mother had emphasized that family was the most important thing, suggesting he had a lot to lose if his mother was to reject him. Disclosure represented a real threat to the disruption of these strong family connections, so individuals could have avoided disclosing to preserve these relationships. Having disclosed their sexual identity though, James, Andrew, and Richard identified their strong family connectedness as the primary reason their families were able to acknowledge and accept their sexual identity. The high level of familial cohesion indicated a strong attachment that could withstand the impact of disclosure, and over time, it helped facilitate the process of acceptance by family members.

**Open communication.** Open communication was also emphasized, especially in James’ and Richard’s family. After the disclosure event occurred, individuals were able to actively address the topic, which appeared to help facilitate the process of acceptance over time. Given that *establishing rules for discussing homosexuality* has been identified as a vital part of the coming out process for families (Beeler & DiProva, 1999), it would seem that open communication has allowed these families to more effectively establish those rules. In reviewing the narratives, though, it appeared that open communication was at times more reflective of dyadic, rather than familial, relationships. For instance, Richard’s relationship with his mother was characterized by a high level of openness as Richard would openly and frequently disclose things, but Richard described how he is less able to discuss aspects of his sexual identity with his father. James noted how his father had not approached him about his sexuality despite the fact that his mother had disclosed it to him, and this lasted for almost two years. For James’

relationship with his father, though, open communication increased over time. It may be that Richard and his father are developing their ability to openly discuss his sexual identity, and this skill will likely lead to increased acceptance from Richard's father.

**Flexibility and adaptability.** Finally, in reviewing the narratives, it became evident that all three families demonstrated a significant level of flexibility and adaptability. Studies have alluded to the inherent need for families to adjust to the new identity of their family member as gay (Baptist & Allen, 2008; Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996; DeVine, 1984), and in particular, families are being asked to change their inherent schemas about their child being heterosexual, which underscores the pervasive nature of heteronormativity (Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996; Herek, 2004; Kitzinger, 2005). Both James' and Andrew's mothers disclosed the loss of the vision of their children marrying an opposite-sex partner and having grandchildren, but Cindy noted she was able to accommodate Andrew's sexuality and now envisions her son marrying a same-sex partner and having grandchildren in an alternative way. This suggested a significant level of cognitive flexibility and adaptability as core schemas were altered to accommodate Andrew's identity. Signs of this adaptability were also evident in family members' willingness to welcome same-sex partners into the home. Family adaptability has been shown to be related to less negative perceptions of parents' initial reactions to identity disclosure (Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006), but the current findings suggest that family adaptability is also an important quality over time as families work toward accepting their child's sexuality.

### **Limitations, Clinical Implications, and Implications for Future Research**

**Limitations of the study.** While the criteria used in selecting participants required that only one family member be willing to participate, the current study about familial processes is

limited as various members did not participate in the study. We are left to wonder about the actual experiences of James' parents, and no interviews were conducted with any of the fathers of the participants. It must be acknowledged that certain findings have been filtered through other family member's perceptions and memories, though there was significant consistency within the narratives of each family.

The information that has been presented is inherently subjective, so certain experiences may not be historically accurate. Given the nature of the interview, individuals may have been unable to verbally express certain phenomena, and the data is then filtered through the researcher's own biases and interpretations (Hewitt, 2007). There must be a clear acknowledgement that these findings do not represent objective reality, but a co-construction of knowledge influenced by context and the belief systems of the researcher and participants (Hewitt, 2007). As the interviews were all conducted by the primary investigator, there is the potential for significant bias on the part of the researcher, who also analyzed and identified the themes. For instance, the primary investigator identified as a Catholic, Mexican-American, gay male who had also come out to this family. These various demographics are similar to all three participants in various manners, so the possibility exists that the primary investigator was primed to identify themes that could have been salient in his coming out process. Although certain steps were taken to address this possibility, like providing extensive quotes from the narratives, the reader should be aware of this potential bias. As the study was conducted by one interviewer, it is also important to consider how the participants' responses may have been shaped by aspects of the primary investigator's identity, including his age, gender, and ethnic identity.

The families for this study were meant to represent examples of a positive coming out process, but as the definition of a positive experience was operationalized and defined by each

family member, it is difficult to determine the validity and reliability of that construct.

Additionally, having met with only three families, it is of course not possible to know how generalizable the findings in this study are to the general public

**Clinical implications.** Having identified a number of themes and common characteristics of families that have described a positive navigation of the coming out process, certain clinical implications are offered for treatment providers who work with gay men or their families. First, clinicians who work with such families are encouraged to consider coming out as a process and not a single event. Individuals may also choose to soften their disclosure by identifying as bisexual, which can be confusing for family members, but this should also be considered a potential part of the overall process.

In understanding coming out as a process that occurs over time, clinicians are encouraged to consider the various ways in which acceptance was expressed by family members. The gay individuals in this study expressed their appreciation of their family's active involvement in their lives as gay men. This included attending gay pride festivals or gay bars, but it also included actions like discussing movies that addressed issues related to the gay community. Inquiring about romantic partners also conveyed a sense of acceptance and validation. It would be important to educate family members about the importance and significance of expressing acceptance in concrete ways.

In identifying common characteristics of families who describe a positive experience of the coming out process, the opportunity exists for clinicians to identify and utilize these strengths in treatment. This may include strengthening a family's ability to openly communicate or reminding them of the importance of family cohesion. In working with gay individuals, it may be

important to assess for the presence of these qualities within the family when discussing whether or not to come out to one's family.

Finally, the coming out process has been identified as a significant stressor; however, this study indicated it may also be a crucial step in helping gay individuals address distress related to their sexual orientation. For one participant, the coming out process was helpful in ameliorating his depression and suicidality. This was a lengthy process, though, so clinicians may need to educate clients on the potential long-term benefits when individuals are faced with immediate distress.

**Implications for future research.** Given the findings and limitations of this study, certain implications for future research have been identified. First, replicating this study with a larger sample would be important in determining whether these results are potentially able to be generalized to larger populations. In replicating this study, it would be important to ensure that fathers and brothers are part of the sample as the current study is limited by their absence.

Another area of focus would be further assessing the nature of incremental disclosures. The current sample not only softened their initial disclosure by identifying as bisexual but also came out to their family in different steps over a number of years. Future research may assess how common this phenomena is and whether it contributes to a positive experience of the coming out process.

Finally, this study was unique in its ability to capture the experiences of ethnically-diverse subjects, who also occupied diverse geographical locations, so future research should continue to focus on recruiting culturally-diverse samples, which includes socioeconomic status and religious affiliation.



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APPENDIX A

Study Flier

# *Coming out Study*

Pepperdine University  
Graduate School of Education and Psychology

LOOKING FOR GAY MALES AND FAMILIES WHO WOULD BE WILLING TO HELP OTHERS BY SHARING THEIR KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCES DURING THE COMING OUT PROCESS. INTERESTED IN FAMILIES FOR WHOM THE PROCESS WAS **POSITIVE AND CONSTRUCTIVE**.

**PARTICIPANTS:** ADULT GAY MALES (AGE 18-26), WHO CAME OUT AT LEAST A YEAR AGO TO THEIR IMMEDIATE FAMILY, **AND** THEIR PARENTS AND SIBLINGS (OVER 18). TO PARTICIPATE, AT LEAST AN ADULT GAY MALE **AND ONE** IMMEDIATE FAMILY MEMBER IS REQUIRED.

IF INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING IN THE STUDY, PLEASE CONTACT MICHAEL BURNIAS AT MICHAEL.BURNIAS@PEPPERDINE.EDU FOR MORE INFORMATION REGARDING THE STUDY. THE RESEARCH STUDY IS BEING CONDUCTED BY MICHAEL BURNIAS, A DOCTORAL STUDENT IN CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY AT PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY, WORKING UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF ROBERT DEMAYO, PH.D., ASSOCIATE DEAN AND PROFESSOR OF PSYCHOLOGY. THIS STUDY IS BEING CONDUCTED TO MEET DISSERTATION REQUIREMENTS

**RISKS TO PARTICIPANTS:** THIS STUDY POSES NO MORE THAN MINIMAL RISK. GIVEN THE POTENTIALLY SENSITIVE NATURE OF THE COMING OUT PROCESS, IT IS REASONABLE TO ASSUME THAT INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES MAY EXPERIENCE THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS THAT THEY HAD NOT ANTICIPATED AND MAY FIND DISTRESSING.

**BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS:** THERE IS NO DIRECT BENEFIT FOR PARTICIPATION. PARTICIPANTS (I.E. FAMILY UNIT) WHO PARTICIPATE WILL RECEIVE A \$50 GIFT CARD AS COMPENSATION, THOUGH. WHILE NO DIRECT BENEFITS FOR PARTICIPATING IN THE STUDY CAN BE GUARANTEED, SOME PARTICIPANTS MAY EXPERIENCE A FEELING OF SATISFACTION FOR HAVING CONTRIBUTED TO A RESEARCH STUDY ON THIS IMPORTANT ISSUE.

**LOCATION:** INTERVIEWS WOULD BE CONDUCTED AT THE WEST LOS ANGELES PEPPERDINE COMMUNITY CLINIC AT 6100 CENTER DRIVE, LOS ANGELES, CA 90045. HOWEVER, IF PARTICIPANTS CAN ENSURE A PRIVATE ENVIRONMENT, INTERVIEWS CAN BE CONDUCTED AT YOUR HOME IF THIS IS MORE CONVENIENT.

**QUESTIONS/CONCERNS:** SHOULD YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS REGARDING YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY, PLEASE CONTACT MICHAEL BURNIAS VIA EMAIL AT MICHAEL.BURNIAS@PEPPERDINE.EDU. ADDITIONALLY, YOU MAY CONTACT ROBERT DEMAYO, PH.D. AT ROBERT.DEMAYO@PEPPERDINE.EDU. IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS CONCERNING YOUR RIGHTS IN THIS RESEARCH, YOU MAY CONTACT DR. DOUG LEIGH AT THE INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB), WHICH IS CONCERNED WITH THE PROTECTION OF PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH PROJECTS, AT (310) 568-2389.

APPENDIX A1

Study Flier

# *Coming out Study*

Pepperdine University  
Graduate School of Education and Psychology

LOOKING FOR GAY MALES AND FAMILIES WHO WOULD BE WILLING TO HELP OTHERS BY SHARING THEIR KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCES DURING THE COMING OUT PROCESS. INTERESTED IN FAMILIES FOR WHOM THE PROCESS WAS **POSITIVE AND CONSTRUCTIVE**.

PARTICIPANTS: ADULT GAY MALES (AGE 18-26), WHO CAME OUT AT LEAST A YEAR AGO TO THEIR IMMEDIATE FAMILY, **AND** THEIR PARENTS AND SIBLINGS (OVER 18). TO PARTICIPATE, AT LEAST AN ADULT GAY MALE **AND ONE** IMMEDIATE FAMILY MEMBER IS REQUIRED.

IF INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING IN THE STUDY, PLEASE CONTACT MICHAEL BURNIAS AT MICHAEL.BURNIAS@PEPPERDINE.EDU FOR MORE INFORMATION REGARDING THE STUDY. THE RESEARCH STUDY IS BEING CONDUCTED BY MICHAEL BURNIAS, A DOCTORAL STUDENT IN CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY AT PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY, WORKING UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF ROBERT DEMAYO, PH.D., ASSOCIATE DEAN AND PROFESSOR OF PSYCHOLOGY. THIS STUDY IS BEING CONDUCTED TO MEET DISSERTATION REQUIREMENTS

RISKS TO PARTICIPANTS: THIS STUDY POSES NO MORE THAN MINIMAL RISK. GIVEN THE POTENTIALLY SENSITIVE NATURE OF THE COMING OUT PROCESS, IT IS REASONABLE TO ASSUME THAT INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES MAY EXPERIENCE THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS THAT THEY HAD NOT ANTICIPATED AND MAY FIND DISTRESSING.

BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS: THERE IS NO DIRECT BENEFIT FOR PARTICIPATION. PARTICIPANTS (I.E. FAMILY UNIT) WHO PARTICIPATE WILL RECEIVE A \$50 GIFT CARD AS COMPENSATION, THOUGH. WHILE NO DIRECT BENEFITS FOR PARTICIPATING IN THE STUDY CAN BE GUARANTEED, SOME PARTICIPANTS MAY EXPERIENCE A FEELING OF SATISFACTION FOR HAVING CONTRIBUTED TO A RESEARCH STUDY ON THIS IMPORTANT ISSUE.

LOCATION: INTERVIEWS WOULD BE CONDUCTED AT THE RESEARCH BUILDING AT THE INSTITUTE OF LIVING AT 200 RETREAT AVENUE, HARTFORD, CT 06114. HOWEVER, IF PARTICIPANTS CAN ENSURE A PRIVATE ENVIRONMENT, INTERVIEWS CAN BE CONDUCTED AT YOUR HOME IF THIS IS MORE CONVENIENT.

QUESTIONS/CONCERNS: SHOULD YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS REGARDING YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY, PLEASE CONTACT MICHAEL BURNIAS VIA EMAIL AT MICHAEL.BURNIAS@PEPPERDINE.EDU. ADDITIONALLY, YOU MAY CONTACT ROBERT DEMAYO, PH.D. AT ROBERT.DEMAYO@PEPPERDINE.EDU. IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS CONCERNING YOUR RIGHTS IN THIS RESEARCH, YOU MAY CONTACT DR. DOUG LEIGH AT THE INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB), WHICH IS CONCERNED WITH THE PROTECTION OF PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH PROJECTS, AT (310) 568-2389.

APPENDIX B  
Screening Inventory

Hello Mr./Mrs.Ms. \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank you for expressing interest in my study and in being a potential participant. My name is Michael Burnias. I'm a graduate student in psychology at Pepperdine University. I currently have my Master's in Clinical Psychology and will graduate with my Doctorate in Clinical Psychology in 2013. This study is being conducted for my dissertation, which is a requirement of my doctoral program. I would like to explain the overall study and what you can expect as a potential participant. If you are still interested, I will ask some questions to determine if you are able to be a participant.

This study is interested in the "coming out" process. In particular, we want to know how families work through this process together. Each family experiences this event in their own way, and each family works through this event in their own. We are interested in learning about your particular experience. We'll ask about your thoughts and feelings, how you navigated the process, what your reactions were, but mostly we want you to tell your story in your own way.

Here is exactly what participation entails. We will schedule a two-hour block of time for a tape-recorded, face-to-face interview, but we will likely not use all of that time. Interviews will be conducted at the West Los Angeles Pepperdine Community Counseling Center in Culver City (or my office in the Research Building at the Institute of Living at Hartford Hospital) to ensure privacy. However, if you can ensure a private environment, interviews can be conducted at your home if this is more convenient. During the interview, we will review a consent form, which you will have to sign if you wish to continue. Your participation is completely voluntary, you can refuse to answer any questions, and you can end the interview early if you wish. In this interview, I will want to learn about your personal experience of the coming out process, including your thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and reactions at the time you found out and since then. I will then ask specific questions. Again, you can decline to answer any questions. At the end, you can add any additional information. I will also provide your family with 1 \$50 gift card as a token of appreciation for your time and participation.

I will ensure that the tape is kept in a confidential manner, so your identity and answers will be protected. Someone will also create a typed transcript of the interview, but that person will not know your identity. After the transcript is checked for accuracy, the tape recording will be erased, and the typed transcript will only have a code, so your name will not be connected to it. There may also be a follow-up telephone call to clarify any questions, but that can be declined as well.

If you are still interested in possible participating, I would like to ask some questions to see if you would be able to participate.

Would you like to continue and be considered as a potential participant? YES NO

**If he/she says NO:**

**Thank you for your inquiry. If you know anyone who might be interested, please forward the email address that you contacted.**

**If he/she says YES:**

I need to ask a few questions to determine if you are eligible:

Are you over the age of 18, and if so, could you tell me your age? \_\_\_\_\_

How would you describe your ethnic/racial background? \_\_\_\_\_

Is English your first language? YES NO

**If he/she says no:**

If not, do you feel comfortable speaking in English? YES NO

Are you a gay male who has come out to his family OR are you a family member of a gay male who has come out? YES NO

How long ago did you come out as gay OR how long ago did your family member come out to you as gay? \_\_\_\_\_

The following statements use a 5-point scale to determine whether you agree or disagree:

1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree

1. In your own way, you and your family have been able to identify and address many of the issues related to the coming out process. \_\_\_\_\_
2. Although it may have been difficult at times, you feel that you and your family have worked through many issues related to the coming out process. \_\_\_\_\_
3. Although it may have been a difficult time, you feel that you and your family have had an overall positive experience of the coming out process. \_\_\_\_\_
4. You feel that your family is as close, or even closer, than before you or your family member came out. \_\_\_\_\_

**If he/she is NOT eligible:**

**Thank you for your inquiry, but it appears that you are not eligible for this study. If you know anyone who might be interested, please forward the email address that you contacted.**

**If he/she IS eligible:**

Thank you for responding to this brief survey. It appears that you are eligible for this study, and a final decision will be made shortly. If you are chosen as a participant, a meeting time will be schedule for the interview, and you will be provided with a document to sign that details the study and your rights as a participant.

Would you be interested in being a participant?

**Address the participation of family members:**

This study is interested in understanding the experience of families. I would need to interview at least the family member who came out as gay and one other family member, but ideally, I could meet individually with all the family members.

Would other family members be interested in participating? If so, you can pass along my email to them, and I can contact them directly.

Do you have any additional questions that can be answered now?



APPENDIX C

Interview Protocol

Hello, Mr./Mrs./Ms \_\_\_\_\_,

### Explanation of study

I would like to take a few moments and remind you about the study that I am conducting. This study is designed to learn about the experiences of families that have had a member disclose that he is gay. This kind of information can only be learned from actual family members who have experienced the coming out process. I want to learn about total experience of the coming out process, including the things you thought, the feelings you had, the actions that you took, but I am most interested in hearing your story in your own way. Do you have any questions before we get started?

(Address any concerns)

### Informed Consent

Before we begin, I would like to review the Informed Consent information. Your participation in this research study must be completely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any question and may terminate this interview at any time and withdraw from this study at any time without further obligation. You and your family will receive 1 \$50 gift card regardless of whether or not you complete the interview. The answers that you provide during this interview will be taped, but your identity will not be made known. Your name and any other personal information will not be included with the interview transcript or any other data forms. I would like to read the consent form with you. If you have any questions, please ask.

(Read consent, obtain signature, and address any questions)

### Test Tape Recorder

I would like to test the tape recorder. Could you please pick a name for yourself, so we don't use your real name on the tape.

My name is Michael Burnias and today's date is \_\_\_\_\_ and I am meeting to interview someone who is using a fictitious name. Could you state that name? \_\_\_\_\_ We are meeting at \_\_\_\_\_ and the starting time is \_\_\_\_\_.

(Play back tape and check sound quality. Continue to address any questions or concerns that arise)

### Introduction to interview

There are three stages to this interview. In the first part, I am going to encourage you to tell your story in your own words, and I will just be making sure I understand exactly what you experienced. When you feel that the story is complete, I will ask specific questions. At the end, I will invite you to share any additional thoughts you have.

**Stage One: Subject's own Story**

(Two separate protocols will be used: one for the gay family member who previously disclosed his sexuality and another for all other family members.)

## APPENDIX D

### Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities

***A Qualitative Study of Familial Factors which Contribute to a Positive Coming Out Process.***

I agree to participate in a research project being conducted by Michael Burnias, M.A., as part of his dissertation requirements for the doctoral degree in clinical psychology at Pepperdine University. I understand that this project is being conducted under the supervision of Robert deMayo, Ph.D., Associate Dean of the Graduate School of Education and Psychology at Pepperdine University.

By signing this form, I acknowledge that I will be asked to participate in an interview with the researcher to discuss my experience of my/my son's/my brother's coming out process. I know that my interview will be audiotaped and transcribed and is being conducted either at my home or at the Pepperdine West Los Angeles Community Counseling Center to ensure privacy. I understand that my involvement in the study and completion of the interview is strictly voluntary. I also understand that I may refuse participation or withdraw from the study at any time with no adverse consequences. I also understand that I may be contacted during the data analysis stage to clarify an answer.

I understand that this study poses no more than minimal risk, similar to the risk encountered in daily life. Potential risks may include fatigue, inconvenience due to amount of time involved, or discomfort at discussing challenging family experiences. I understand that the interviewer will attend to feelings of fatigue or discomfort and that I reserve the right to refuse to answer any question I choose not to respond to. Participants needing emotional support following completion of the interview can contact the Pepperdine West Los Angeles Community Counseling Center, (310) 568-5752.

I understand that there are no direct benefits to subjects participating in the research. Participants may experience a sense of satisfaction from having contributed to a research study. I understand that my family and I will receive one \$50 gift card following the completion of the interview.

I understand that the researcher, Michael Burnias, M.A., will take all reasonable measures to protect the confidentiality of my responses and that my identity will not be revealed in any publication that may result from this research. Only the researcher and his supervisor, Robert deMayo, Ph.D., will have access to the interview responses. Information that is collected will be kept in a locked cabinet and will only be labeled with codes to protect my confidentiality. I understand that my name will only be on this form and a master code list that will be kept separate from my responses and destroyed at the end of the study. Information stored on the researcher's computer will only be labeled with codes and will be password protected. I understand that, while the information I provide will be kept confidential, there are certain limitations to confidentiality according to state and federal law. Under California law, there are exceptions to confidentiality, including suspicion that a child, elder, or dependent adult is being abused, or if an individual discloses an intent to harm himself/herself or others.

I understand that Michael Burnias, M.A. is willing to answer any questions I may have regarding the research study and that I can contact him directly at [mpburnia@pepperdine.edu](mailto:mpburnia@pepperdine.edu). I understand that I may also contact Robert deMayo, Ph.D. at [robert.demayo@pepperdine.edu](mailto:robert.demayo@pepperdine.edu) if I have other questions or concerns about this research. If I have questions about my rights as a participant in this study, I can contact Dr. Doug Leigh, Head of the Graduate and Professional Schools Institutional Review Board at Pepperdine University, Graduate School of Education and Psychology, 6100 Center Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90045; (310) 568-2389.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

APPENDIX D1

Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities

***A Qualitative Study of Familial Factors which Contribute to a Positive Coming Out Process.***

I agree to participate in a research project being conducted by Michael Burnias, M.A., as part of his dissertation requirements for the doctoral degree in clinical psychology at Pepperdine University. I understand that this project is being conducted under the supervision of Robert deMayo, Ph.D., Associate Dean of the Graduate School of Education and Psychology at Pepperdine University.

By signing this form, I acknowledge that I will be asked to participate in an interview with the researcher to discuss my experience of my/my son's/my brother's coming out process. I know that my interview will be audiotaped and transcribed and is being conducted either at my home or at the Institute of Living, Research Building, to ensure privacy. I understand that my involvement in the study and completion of the interview is strictly voluntary. I also understand that I may refuse participation or withdraw from the study at any time with no adverse consequences. I also understand that I may be contacted during the data analysis stage to clarify an answer.

I understand that this study poses no more than minimal risk, similar to the risk encountered in daily life. Potential risks may include fatigue, inconvenience due to amount of time involved, or discomfort at discussing challenging family experiences. I understand that the interviewer will attend to feelings of fatigue or discomfort and that I reserve the right to refuse to answer any question I choose not to respond to. Participants needing emotional support following completion of the interview can contact the Assessment Center at the Institute of Living at (860) 545-7200.

I understand that there are no direct benefits to subjects participating in the research. Participants may experience a sense of satisfaction from having contributed to a research study. I understand that my family and I will receive one \$50 gift card following the completion of the interview.

I understand that the researcher, Michael Burnias, M.A., will take all reasonable measures to protect the confidentiality of my responses and that my identity will not be revealed in any publication that may result from this research. Only the researcher and his supervisor, Robert deMayo, Ph.D., will have access to the interview responses. Information that is collected will be kept in a locked cabinet and will only be labeled with codes to protect my confidentiality. I understand that my name will only be on this form and a master code list that will be kept separate from my responses and destroyed at the end of the study. Information stored on the researcher's computer will only be labeled with codes and will be password protected. I understand that, while the information I provide will be kept confidential, there are certain limitations to confidentiality according to state and federal law. Under Connecticut law, there are exceptions to confidentiality, including suspicion that a child, elder, or dependent adult is being abused, or if an individual discloses an intent to harm himself/herself or others.

I understand that Michael Burnias, M.A. is willing to answer any questions I may have regarding the research study and that I can contact him directly at [mpburnia@pepperdine.edu](mailto:mpburnia@pepperdine.edu). I understand that I may also contact Robert deMayo, Ph.D. at [robert.demayo@pepperdine.edu](mailto:robert.demayo@pepperdine.edu) if I have other questions or concerns about this research. If I have questions about my rights as a participant in this study, I can contact Dr. Doug Leigh, Head of the Graduate and Professional Schools Institutional Review Board at Pepperdine University, Graduate School of Education and Psychology, 6100 Center Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90045; (310) 568-2389.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

APPENDIX E

Semi-Structured Interview: Gay Brother/Son



### **Stage One: Subject's Own Story**

Beginning with when you decided to come out, please tell me about the process of coming out to your family, and tell me the story of how they reacted and how your family has dealt with your sexuality since coming out.

### **Stage Two: Focused Questions**

(Follow-up questions will be used to help the subject expand their story. In particular, if the subject has spoken in a general, unspecific way, he will be redirected to give specific example/stories and asked about his thoughts, feelings, or actions)

(Specific questions will then be asked if they have not been addressed)

#### **Specific Questions:**

I am going to ask some specific questions now. You may have covered some of these topics, but I want to make sure that I understand your experience. If you can, try to answer the following questions with regard to your whole family and to each family member individually.

(If the participant only discusses one member, prompt about each member).

1. How did you come to the decision to disclose your sexuality to your family?
2. Could you describe any concerns you had about coming out to your family in general and to specific members?
3. How would you describe your expectations of their reactions versus their actual reactions?
4. In terms of recognizing and accepting your sexuality, how would you describe the process your family went through?
  - a) What do you think are the thoughts they were having or the emotions they were feeling?
  - b) What do you think are some of the actions they took to work through this?
5. What do you think are some of the qualities of your family that made the whole process easier?
  - a) What would you say are your family's strengths?
  - b) What are some qualities of your family that made it more difficult?
6. How would you describe the way that you and your family typically address family issues?
  - a) How was the way they addressed your coming out similar to or different than the way your family typically addressed family issues?
7. How would you describe your family's current knowledge of your life as a gay man?
  - a) What do you think influences their current awareness?
8. Can you describe moments where you felt that your family had accepted your sexuality?
9. Keeping your sexuality in mind, how do you envision your future with your family?
10. Before you came out, how would you describe your family's awareness of gay culture or gay issues?

- a) How would you describe their awareness now?
  - b) What are some things they have done to learn more about gay culture and about your life as a gay man?
11. How do you think the media may have influenced your family's reactions to you being gay?
  12. How do you think your family's cultural beliefs influenced their reactions?
    - a) How have any religious beliefs influenced their reactions?
  13. How do you think the identity of your family has changed since you came out?
  14. How did you family deal with either sharing or not sharing your news with others?

### **Stage Three: Additional Thoughts**

Would you like to add anything else? Are there topics that you feel I missed or questions that I should ask for my next interview?

And it is okay if I contact you in the future with some clarifying questions?

Thank you so much. I am going to turn the tape off now. The time is \_\_\_\_\_.

APPENDIX F

Semi-Structured Interview: Family Member

### **Stage One: Subject's Own Story**

Please tell me what it was like for you when X came out as gay. Tell me the story of how you reacted and the process you have gone through to acknowledge and accept X's sexuality.

### **Stage Two: Focused Questions**

(Follow-up questions will be used to help the subject expand their story. In particular, if the subject has spoken in a general, unspecific way, he/she will be redirected to give specific example/stories and asked about his/her thoughts, feelings, or actions)

(Specific questions will then be asked if they have not been addressed)

### **Specific Questions:**

I am going to ask some specific questions now. You may have covered some of these topics, but I want to make sure that I understand your experience.

1. Can you tell me how other family members reacted when X came out?
  - a) What do you think influenced their reactions?
  - b) What do you think influenced your reaction?
2. Can you tell me about the process that you and your family went through after learning about X's sexuality?
  - a) Can you tell me about any struggles that you had with coping? What about other family members?
  - b) What are some things you did to cope with the news? What are things other family members did?
3. How would you describe the way that you and your family typically address family issues?
  - b) How was the way you addressed X's coming out similar to or different than the way your family typically addresses family issues?
4. Can you tell me about the qualities of your family that made the whole process easier?
  - c) What would you say are your family's strengths?
  - d) What are some qualities of your family that made it more difficult?
5. How would you describe your current knowledge of X's life as a gay man?
  - a) Can you describe the process that you and your family went through to learn more about X's sexuality?
6. How would you describe your awareness of gay culture and gay issues before X came out?
  - a) How would you describe them now?
  - b) How have you learned more about gay culture?
7. How would you say the media has influenced your feelings about gay culture and about X being gay?
8. How would you say your own cultural beliefs have influenced your feelings about X being gay?
  - a) Have any religious beliefs influenced you?

9. How do you feel about having a gay family member?
10. Keeping X's sexuality in mind, how do you envision your future as a family?
11. How do you feel your identity as a family has changed since X came out?
12. How did you decide to share or not share the news with others?

**Stage Three: Additional Thoughts**

Would you like to add anything else? Are there topics that you feel I missed or questions that I should ask for my next interview?

And it is okay if I contact you in the future with some clarifying questions?

Thank you so much. I am going to turn the tape off now. The time is\_\_\_\_\_.

APPENDIX G

Data Sheet

Interviewee fictitious name:

Date:

Length of interview:

**Demographics:**

Age:

Relationship/Family Status:

Married/Permanent Partnership: \_\_\_\_\_  
For how long? \_\_\_\_\_

In a serious relationship: \_\_\_\_\_  
For how long? \_\_\_\_\_

Not in a relationship \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation:

How would you describe your ethnicity/cultural group?

How would you describe your sexual orientation?

## APPENDIX H

## Table 1. Demographics



	Family 1: James	Family 1: Amanda	Family 2: Andrew	Family 2: Renee	Family 2: Lisa	Family 3: Richard	Family 3: Cindy
Relationship to study subject	Self	Sister	Self	Sister	Mother	Self	Mother
Age	25	32	26	24	48	18	45
Sexual Orientation	Gay	Straight	Gay	Straight	Straight	Gay	Straight
Ethnic Identification	Filipino- American	Filipino- American	Mexican- American	Mexican- American	Mexican- American	Italian- American	Italian- American
Religious Affiliation	Roman Catholic	"Catholic- lite"	Roman Catholic	"Not very religious"	"Spiritual, not religious"	Roman Catholic	Roman Catholic

## APPENDIX I

Table 2. Participants Discuss Common Themes

Theme	James (Family 1)	Andrew (Family 2)	Richard (Family 3)
Coming Out in Stages	"[Coming out] was quite a journey; it was over multiple years." (p. 89)	"The extent of me coming out that first time was to tell my Mom that I was asexual[...] I think a lot of that was to protect myself." (p. 109)	"I thought that If I said I was bi and said I did like girls, it would be normal, and I just wanted to be normal." (p. 126)
Responses to Coming Out			"[My Mom said,] 'It's normal; it's okay. I still love you more than everybody and everything in the world.'" (p. 127)
Expressions of Acceptance	"I'm always the butt of all the gay jokes, but it's fun. It's not in an alienating way...it's to show we're embracing it." (p. 91)	"It's interesting to see my sister wanting a relationship with me and my boyfriend." (p. 111)	
Cultural Influences	"[My parents] grew up in a time and place [the Philippines] that told them [homosexuality] was wrong." (p. 92)		"I think my family in general based on their cultural beliefs doesn't accept [being gay] [...] I don't feel like there's a lot of gay Italians." (p. 129)
Exposure to Homosexuality		"Knowing [this student] was gay[...] prompted me to not only be confused[...] but then realized it's okay, it's okay I'm gay." (p. 112)	"I started going to a group, and then I met a bunch of friends who are also gay[...] [They] showed me that like I too could be[...] happy." (p. 128)
Psychological Distress			"I didn't tell one person I was gay, and[...] every time I had a thought about a guy I would like cover it up in my head[...] I was ready to like just go insane." (p. 128)

\**Note.* Page numbers refer to the discussion of each theme for each family, not to the location of exact quote

## APPENDIX J

Table 3. Family Members Discuss Common Themes

Theme	Family 1: Amanda (sister)	Family 2: Renee (sister)	Family 2: Lisa (mother)	Family 3: Cindy (mother)
Coming Out in Stages		"I don't think he ever really came to us and said, 'I'm gay.'" (p. 109)	"It came in little bits and pieces. It wasn't like coming out of the closet [...] It was just like a transition." (p. 109)	"Only Richard and I knew [he was gay][...] I wanted my husband to know because I didn't want to keep a secret." (p. 126)
Responses to Coming Out	"I thought [being gay] was cool. I really did." (p. 90)	"I remember that I started crying[...] To me it was out of the norm." (p. 110)	"I remember I expressed to him my concern [...] if he was gay that it was such a hard life." (p. 110)	"I wasn't sure how to react. I felt bad and scared at the same time[...] because I saw how scared he was." (p. 127)
Expressions of Acceptance	"That's cool, let's go to the clubs!" (p. 91)	"[Eventually] I didn't see anything wrong with [being gay]." (p. 111)	"He can get married, and yes, I can have grandchildren, not in a traditional sense, but I can still have grandchildren." (p. 111)	
Cultural Influences	"I don't think it would be as easy to come out to family there [in the Philippines] versus here [in the United States]." (p. 92)			"[My husband's] family was a different type of Italian. They were more outspoken and more prejudiced." (p. 129)
Exposure to Homosexuality	"I had gay co-workers, actors that would come into the shows were gay, so I think I got a lot of my exposure [at work]." (p. 94)	"I never had met a gay person when I was in high school, so to me it was out of the norm." (p. 112)	"I didn't know or have a lot of interaction with gay people and[...] whenever any reference was made it was that they were promiscuous." (p. 112)	"My brother is gay, 50-years-old, and has never fully come out, and I watched him get tormented as a child." (p. 138)
Psychological Distress				"Having my son getting [bullied] that way, it was just[...] [an] overload of pain." (p. 128)

\*Note. Page numbers refer to the discussion of each theme for each family, not to the location of exact quote

APPENDIX K

Graduate & Professional Schools Institutional Review Board

**June 11, 2013**

**Michael Burnias**

**Protocol #: P0513D01**

**Project Title: A Qualitative Study of Familiar Factors that Contribute to A Positive Coming Out Process**

Dear Mr. Burnias,

Thank you for submitting your application, *A Qualitative Study of Familiar Factors that Contribute to A Positive Coming Out Process*, for exempt review to Pepperdine University's Graduate and Professional Schools Institutional Review Board (GPS IRB). The IRB appreciates the work you and your faculty advisor, Dr. Robert deMayo, have done on the proposal. The IRB has reviewed your submitted IRB application and all ancillary materials. Upon review, the IRB has determined that the above entitled project meets the requirements for exemption under the federal regulations (45 CFR 46 - <http://www.nihtraining.com/ohsrsite/guidelines/45cfr46.html>) that govern the protections of human subjects. Specifically, section 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) states:

(b) Unless otherwise required by Department or Agency heads, research activities in which the only involvement of human subjects will be in one or more of the following categories are exempt from this policy:

**Category (2) of 45 CFR 46.101**, research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: a) Information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and b) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Your research must be conducted according to the proposal that was submitted to the IRB. If changes to the approved protocol occur, a revised protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before implementation. For any proposed changes in your research protocol, please submit a **Request for Modification Form** to the GPS IRB. Because your study falls under exemption, there is no requirement for continuing IRB review of your project. Please be aware that changes to your protocol may prevent the research from qualifying for exemption from 45 CFR 46.101 and require submission of a new IRB application or other materials to the GPS IRB.

A goal of the IRB is to prevent negative occurrences during any research study. However, despite our best intent, unforeseen circumstances or events may arise during the research. If an unexpected situation or adverse event happens during your investigation, please notify the GPS IRB as soon as possible. We will ask for a complete explanation of the event and your response. Other actions also may be required depending on the nature of the event. Details regarding the timeframe in which adverse events must be reported to the GPS IRB and the appropriate form to be used to report this information can be found in the *Pepperdine University Protection of*

*Human Participants in Research: Policies and Procedures Manual* (see link to “policy material” at <http://www.pepperdine.edu/irb/graduate/>).

Please refer to the protocol number denoted above in all further communication or correspondence related to this approval. Should you have additional questions, please contact me. On behalf of the GPS IRB, I wish you success in this scholarly pursuit.

Sincerely,

Doug Leigh, Ph.D.  
Chair, Graduate and Professional Schools IRB

cc: Dr. Lee Kats, Vice Provost for Research and Strategic Initiatives  
Ms. Alexandra Roosa, Director Research and Sponsored Programs  
Dr. Robert deMayo, Graduate School of Education and Psychology