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ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AS THE PARENT OF A LESBIAN OR GAY MALE, by MARY JANE PHILLIPS, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Education, Georgia State University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chair, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty. The Dean of the College of Education concurs.

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RESEARCH FUNDING

2003–2004	Roy Scrivner Research Grant on Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Family Psychology and Therapy from the American Psychological Foundation
2004	Malyon-Smith Scholarship Award from the American Psychological Association, Division 44: Society for the Psychological Study of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Issues

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ABSTRACT

IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AS THE PARENT
OF A LESBIAN OR GAY MALE
by
Mary Jane Phillips

PARENTAL RESPONSES TO HAVING
A GAY SON OR LESBIAN DAUGHTER

The purpose of this article was to review critically the literature concerning parents' responses when learning that they have a gay son or a lesbian daughter. Research to date has explored some aspects of parental adjustment when learning that a child is lesbian or gay, but most has focused on parents' initial reactions. The small body of literature examining changes over time in parents' attitudes toward gay sons and lesbian daughters has most frequently employed stage-based conceptualizations, while the few studies using phenomenological approaches have provided clues about themes in parental responses to learning that their children are lesbian or gay. Factors that appear to facilitate parental acceptance are highlighted, including family resiliency and general family functioning. Implications and future research directions are discussed.

IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AS THE PARENT
OF A LESBIAN OR GAY MALE

This study is designed to explore the adaptational processes that parents of lesbians and gay men experience when their children self-disclose same-sex attractions. Seventeen parents described their experiences in semi-structured interviews. The interview transcripts were analyzed using grounded theory methodology to develop a

model of parental adjustment over time. Parents experienced emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses during three different phases. Emotional responses were most dominant initially. Cognitive and behavioral adjustments were the primary focus of the middle phase. Moral/spiritual issues were the major concern of the final phase. Some parents who successfully negotiated these adjustments came to view being the parent of a gay male or lesbian as an important component of their identities. Implications for further research and clinical practice are discussed.

IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AS THE PARENT OF A LESBIAN OR GAY MALE

by
Mary Jane Phillips

A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the
Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
Counselor Education and Practice
in
the Department of Counseling and Psychological Services
in
the College of Education
Georgia State University

Atlanta, Georgia
2007

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There have been many people who have been extremely helpful during this research. I am very grateful to the members of my Dissertation Advisory Committee: Dr. Julie Ancis, whose guidance, encouragement, and standard of excellence have been invaluable; Dr. Sheryl Gowen, whose modeling of feminist teaching and scholarship have been inspiring; and Drs. Cathy Brack and Brian Dew, who have provided support and guidance throughout the process. I would also like to thank Dr. Gary Arthur, who has been an exceptional mentor to me in this program.

I am particularly indebted to the parents who participated in this study. Their honesty, courage, and love for their children are an inspiration for all parents. I hope that I have done justice to their stories.

I have benefited from the mentoring and guidance of many professionals, particularly Drs. Cay and Kent Welsh, Dr. Arnold Wade, and Dr. Roger Winston. My colleagues, especially Susan Hendley, Valerie Niblett, and Evelyn Palm, have supported my efforts toward completion of this degree program. Dr. Lee Gillis has been a sounding board, and I particularly thank him for comments on an earlier draft of this work.

The encouragement of many friends, especially Deb Ross, has been especially valuable. The members of the organization PFLAG [Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays], especially Dr. René Sanchez and Dr. Minerva Villafane-Garcia, have been inspirational and untiring in their support. In addition, Dr. Mark Cassidy and Neil Walker were instrumental in allowing me to start down this path.

Special acknowledgement goes to my family. My parents, Norma Gilmore Dickey and David Faris Dickey, encouraged my love of learning. My sister Sally Detter has been especially supportive of my progress. My son, Chris Phillips, and my husband, Glen Phillips, have given up their mother and wife to academic pursuits. Their love, patience, and unwavering support have made this work possible.

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ABBREVIATIONS

FAAR	Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response
PFLAG	Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays

CHAPTER 1

PARENTAL RESPONSES TO HAVING A GAY SON OR LESBIAN DAUGHTER

The issue of parents' reactions to the disclosure of homosexuality by a daughter or son is not well understood. There is a body of literature describing initial parental responses, which can range from denial to anger to acceptance (Ben-Ari, 1995b, 1995c; Savin-Williams & Dubé, 1998). In addition, there have been a few studies considering parents' attitudes toward their gay sons and lesbian daughters after some period of time has elapsed since the discovery (Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Ben-Ari, 1995b). In general, the evidence suggests that parents tend to become more tolerant of their children's minority sexual orientation over time (Crosbie-Burnett, Foster, Murray, & Bowen, 1996). What has not been thoroughly explored to date is the set of processes associated with the change from a less-accepting to a more-accepting stance by parents.

Adjusting to the news that an offspring is gay or lesbian is often a difficult process for parents. The goal of this inquiry is to understand better what parents might reasonably expect to experience as they adapt to the news that a son is gay or a daughter lesbian. Parents may benefit from knowing what others in similar circumstances have encountered in this process. Similarly, family members and friends could be more supportive and helpful regarding what the parents are experiencing if they have an accurate understanding of what to expect. Mental health professionals, whose assistance might be sought in managing the adjustment process, have perhaps the greatest need.

These professionals are expected to use research-based information in working with their clients. The information in this study could provide just such knowledge.

In this study, I explore whether parents actually do experience a positive adaptation in their attitudes toward their daughters and sons with same-sex attractions. In cases where I find they do experience positive adaptation, I identify the elements that encourage and affect those changes. The use of grounded theory methodology will allow for an enhanced understanding of the complex interplay of factors and reactions that affect this phenomenon. I construct a dynamic model of parents' development of more accepting attitudes toward their gay sons and lesbian daughters.

The Coming Out Process

Boxer, Cook, and Herdt (1991) define coming out as "the process by which one declares his/her identity to be 'homosexual' or 'gay' or 'lesbian' to family, friends or others who assume the person to be 'heterosexual' " (p. 59). Coming out is generally seen as a normal and positive – though not necessarily required – interpersonal accomplishment (Beaty, 1999; Cain, 1991; Gonsiorek, 1995). Typically, lesbians and gay males reveal their sexual orientation to one or more friends before any family members are told (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; D'Augelli & Patterson, 2001). This does not suggest that coming out to parents is unimportant; rather, it is because of its significance that youth are cautious about initiating this disclosure (Floyd & Stein, 2002; Savin-Williams, 2001).

Much of the early literature about the experience of developing a gay or lesbian identity focused on parents' negative responses when their daughters and sons came out to them (Boxer et al., 1991; Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Strommen, 1989). Commonly

reported parental responses to a child's coming out included emotional rebuff, financial rejection, and verbal or physical assault (Anderson, 1987). There are some concerns with sampling issues in this research, however. It relied only on children's accounts, and participants in several of these studies came primarily from support groups catering to youth in large metropolitan areas, a relatively large number of whom had been rejected by their families.

In the face of real risks, however, why would young people come out to close family members? While coming out – especially to parents – is difficult, not doing so can be problematic as well. Hiding one's minority sexual orientation has been correlated with increased rates of depression (Grambling, Carr, & McCain, 2000), alcoholism and other substance abuse (Friedman & Downey, 1994; Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001), and suicidal behaviors (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Rotheram-Borus, Hunter, & Rosario, 1994).

Coming out has also been connected with a number of positive results for lesbians and gay males. Particularly when family members are accepting, disclosing sexual minority status to parents is associated with increased self-esteem (Boxer, Cook, & Herdt, 1999), closer relatedness with parents (Floyd, Stein, Harter, Allison, & Nye, 1999), and more positive well-being (Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001). Path modeling has shown that the mental health and self-esteem of gay men were directly affected by family acceptance, family support, and homosexual identity formation (Elizur & Ziv, 2001). Support from family members can even help to mitigate the impact of verbal and physical attacks by others on lesbian, gay and bisexual young people (Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995).

In addition, most sexual minority youth report that they want strong family ties (Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001; Savin-Williams, 1989, 1996), and that a major motivation for coming out to parents is the desire for enhanced closeness (Savin-Williams, 2001). Research has demonstrated that, for both youth and their parents, the parental reaction to the child's coming out is critical to their post-disclosure relationship (Ben-Ari, 1995b). Thus, it is not surprising that much of the literature on gays' and lesbians' relationships with their family members focuses on the impact of the coming out process on sexual minority young people.

How a Child's Coming Out Affects Parents

While studies suggest that coming out is associated with enhanced self-esteem and better overall mental health for young people, especially when family members are accepting, much of the research to date has focused on only one aspect of the issue – the impact of coming out on lesbian and gay young people. When considered systemically, a change in one individual will generally have reciprocal influences on other family members, leading some to suggest that ". . . the coming out process in a child may potentially initiate a parallel process in the parent" (Boxer et al., 1991, p. 64).

It has only been recently that scholars have begun to consider the effects on parents of the news that a son or daughter is gay or lesbian. Savin-Williams (1998b) noted, "Researchers have neglected asking parents their views regarding having a gay member in the family, largely because few parents are willing to discuss having a gay child and because few youths are willing to volunteer their parents to researchers" (p. 95). While relatively little is known about parental reactions to a child's coming out in general, there is a particular paucity of information about the set of processes associated

with changes in parents' attitudes as they adjust to the news that they have a lesbian or gay child.

Jones (1978) and Weinberg (1973) were among the first formally trained researchers to study parental reactions to a child's coming out. The primary responses they discovered among parents were a sense that the child was suddenly a stranger to them and feelings of guilt for their presumed role in causing the child to be homosexual. A number of additional studies have expanded knowledge of initial parental responses to the coming out of a daughter or son. Among the reported reactions are shock, shame, and guilt (Ben-Ari, 1995b); fear and self-blame (LaSala, 2000); regret, confusion, and denial (Robinson, Walters, & Skeen, 1989); anger (Herdt & Boxer, 1993); and depression (Griffin, Wirth, & Wirth, 1986).

While many parents do respond negatively, at least at first, to a child's disclosure of sexual-minority status (Ben-Ari, 1995b), there is increasing evidence demonstrating that these attitudes rarely remain stagnant. Contrary to some earlier findings (Anderson, 1987), more recent research suggests that approximately half of parents do eventually come to accept their children's minority sexual orientation (Cramer & Roach, 1988; Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996; D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998; Savin-Williams, 1998a). Thus, it appears that parents experience a process of adjustment to the information that a daughter or son is lesbian or gay.

Stage-Based Conceptualizations

Several researchers have proposed that parents of gay men and lesbians encounter stage-like changes that parallel the developmental levels reached by their sons and daughters. DeVine (1983-1984) was the first to consider parents' experiences from this

perspective. While his framework allows for variations associated with systemic family patterns, DeVine concluded that family members of lesbians and gay men experience five stages of adjustment, roughly comparable to Cass's (1979) depiction of the progression of gay/lesbian identity development. The first three of DeVine's stages–subliminal awareness, impact, and adjustment–are characterized by a refusal to accept that a family member is homosexual. The later two stages–resolution and integration–assume tolerance and allow for the reincorporation of the lesbian or gay member into the family system.

Other investigators (Anderson, 1987, Robinson, Walters, & Skeen, 1989) suggest that parental adjustment follows a pattern similar to the grief reaction outlined by Kübler-Ross (1969). Anderson studied gay and lesbian adolescents who were participants in a support group, interviewing them about family and peer relationships. Based on these youths' perceptions, Anderson outlined three stages of parental response: (a) shock and denial, which occurs when the parent initially learns that a daughter is lesbian or a son is gay; (b) anger and guilt, during which the focus is on seeking the cause of the offspring's homosexuality, especially with regard to the fear that the parents are responsible; and (c) acknowledgement, in which the parents come to accept their offspring's sexual orientation. Similarly, Robinson et al. asked parents to respond to a questionnaire about their initial reactions to the news that a son or daughter is gay as well as any changes in attitudes that they experienced related to the issue over time. Results indicated that parents experience a series of stage-based reactions. These responses, which parallel the Kubler-Ross grieving stages, begin with confusion, denial, and regret. Eventually, parents often come to accept their son's or daughter's homosexuality (Robinson et al.).

Despite these findings, methodological concerns cast doubt on the universal validity of a grieving model to account for parents' feelings and behaviors in coming to terms with a child's homosexuality (Savin-Williams, 2001; Savin-Williams & Dubé, 1998). More specifically, it is not surprising that Robinson et al. (1989) found support for the grieving model because their questions describing possible adjustments in parental perspectives over time offered only the Kübler-Ross stages of grief as descriptors. This does not rule out the possibility that there might be a normative series of reactions that parents can expect, however (Savin-Williams & Dubé).

Other studies have found that changes in parental reactions over time might appear stage-like but do not conform to any previously recognized patterns. For example, Crosbie-Burnett et al. (1996) evaluated family members' perspectives from a social-cognitive-behavioral framework. They suggested that possible stages of parental adjustment might include (a) suspicion that the family member is lesbian or gay; (b) after disclosure, an attempt to answer the question of etiology; (c) an increasing awareness of implications of this marginalized status; and (d) grappling with their own decisions regarding coming out as a parent of a gay male or lesbian, which depend in large part on the expected consequences of disclosure. While not truly descriptive, Ben-Ari (1995b) also categorizes parents' responses as falling into prediscovery, discovery, and postdiscovery stages.

Theme-Based Conceptualizations

In a limited number of studies, researchers have used a phenomenological perspective to study themes in parental responses to disclosure of same-sex attractions by their daughters and sons. One such set of themes describes the immediate internal

experiences of parents who learn that a daughter is lesbian or a son is gay. Like the parents in Jones's (1978) and Weinberg's (1973) early studies, more recent research has confirmed a tendency to worry about causality (Bernstein, 1990). Other feelings and experiences that parents might have include panic, a deep sense of sadness and loss (Saltzburg, 2004), fear for the child's safety, shame (Beeler & DiProva, 1999), suspicion, heightened introspection, and personal growth (Boxer et al., 1991).

Intra-family concerns are also dominant. Because few families have explored such issues before, family members first must develop norms for acceptable discussions of homosexually-related information. Parents commonly report struggling with concerns about what the future will hold for a gay or lesbian child. An assumption that they will never have grandchildren – not always realized – is an especially widespread problem (Boxer et al., 1991). In addition, some mothers and fathers experience an emotional detachment from their families, and withdraw for a time from their parental roles (Saltzburg, 2004). Regardless of these difficulties, many parents report that they have a strong desire to maintain good relationships with their children (Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Bernstein, 1990); the children generally share similar goals (Savin-Williams, 2003).

Some parents are even able to move toward a committed affirmation of homosexuality, and they become activists for gay rights. There appear to be two possible avenues through which this can occur. One such group of parents is already committed to social justice causes and simply incorporates gay rights into this ongoing activism. For others, their loyalty to their children leads them to adopt a more proactive stance in combating heterosexism in the culture (Vernaglia, 2000). There is evidence that many parents work through their initial misgivings about their sons' and daughters' minority

sexual orientation to achieve at least acceptance, if not activism. They are then able to incorporate this aspect of their children's experiences into the ongoing narrative of their own lives (Ben-Ari, 1995c; Herdt & Koff, 2000). As Beeler and DiProva (1999) describe it, "acceptance and integration are, perhaps, not an end point but, in an important way, a beginning point (p. 454).

Factors Facilitating Parental Acceptance

Information and Support

The way in which the disclosure occurs can have an impact on parental reactions. Ben-Ari (1995b), in a study of the family dynamics associated with the coming out process, recommended that gay and lesbian youth make an effort to educate their parents about homosexuality prior to disclosure. In another article, he suggested that if the daughter or son were to frame coming out as an effort to increase intimacy and closeness within the family, the parents' experience of dealing with that information would probably be more positive (Ben-Ari, 1995a).

A key approach which helps parents to accept their homosexual offspring is seeking information and exposure to the lesbian and gay community. It is especially important for parents whose sons or daughters have recently come out to them to find gay-affirmative messages. This includes written information (Borhek, 1993; Fairchild & Hayward, 1979; Griffin et al., 1986; Herdt & Koff, 2000; Jones, 1978; Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays [PFLAG], 1995a, 1995b, n.d.; Savin-Williams, 2001) and exposure to gay men and lesbians leading "normal" lives. This allows parents to reorganize their expectations about the "gay lifestyle" so as to include a broader range of

options. This practice also helps parents develop alternative visions of the future that their children might encounter (Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Bernstein, 1990).

A related process involves including lesbian and gay individuals (other than their children) into their lives. Direct, ongoing interactions with gay men and lesbians can change their views of homosexuality and allow them to begin the process of managing heterosexist societal structures (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). Some parents seek out mentors in the gay community to help them understand their daughters' and sons' experiences more fully (Saltzburg, 2004). Many parents also find that support from other parents in similar circumstances is invaluable (Saltzburg). Initially, many parents feel ashamed of the same-sex attractions of their offspring, but they come to realize over time that society – not their children – is to blame for that feeling.

Merighi and Grimes (2000) provide some interesting indicators in their attempt to explain the dynamic adjustment experiences of the parents of gay men. These authors interviewed gay men from African American, European American, Mexican American, and Vietnamese American backgrounds and explored their perceptions of factors, which they called turning points, that resulted in a change in attitude among family members from less-accepting to more-accepting perspectives. Merighi and Grimes identify three such situations: (a) the family member seeking out gay-affirmative sources of information and support, (b) the young adult setting appropriate boundaries in the relationship, and (c) the family member acknowledging that his or her expectations for a heterosexual life for the child will not be fulfilled. However, their data come only from the perceptions of the gay sons instead of those of their parents, which is a significant limitation. There is evidence that the perceptions of adolescents can differ from those of

their parents (Boxer et al., 1991; Demo, Small, & Savin-Williams, 1987). Thus it is important to base understanding of parents' reactions on the experiences of the parents themselves rather than their children's reports.

General Family Functioning

Aspects of general family functioning clearly are related to parental adaptation. Crosbie-Burnett et al. (1996) concluded that the nature of the relationships among various family subsystems can affect adjustment of individual family members. For example, adjustment to the news that an offspring is lesbian or gay can make the marital subsystem – the parents – either more or less cohesive, depending on how they approach the process (Olson, 2000). If parents who learn that an offspring is lesbian or gay make a joint effort to learn more about the gay and lesbian community, they might be expected to adapt better to the news than those who work at cross purposes with one another.

A key predictor of parental adjustment is the nature of previous relationships among the family members. A number of researchers have concluded that the best predictor of parents' responses to a child's disclosure of same-sex attractions is the relationship that parent had with the child prior to his or her coming out. The closer the predisclosure relationship, the more likely it is that that family members will remain close afterward (Ben-Ari, 1995b; Grambling et al., 2000), even if the relationship is strained for a period of time initially (Savin-Williams, 1998b).

Gender and age can also play roles in parental responses to a child's coming out. Savin-Williams (2001) explored a number of dynamics influenced by the gender of parents and their children. In general, he reported that both mothers and fathers had more difficulty accepting that a daughter was lesbian than that a son was gay. In addition,

fathers had more problems accepting the coming out of a child of either gender than did mothers. Saltzburg (2004) found that same-sex dyads – that is, mothers and their lesbian daughters, or fathers and their gay sons – appear to have particular difficulties associated with their adjustment processes. Age of parent and of child are only beginning to be explored, with some researchers suggesting that parents at mid-life who learn of their adolescent daughters' and sons' minority sexual orientation face particular challenges in managing the stressors associated with this set of events (Allen, 1999; Saltzburg, 2004).

Allen (1999) used a reflexive qualitative method to explore how older parents of adult gay children manage the stigmatization they often experience. Preliminary analysis of her interview data suggests that a number of factors might affect parental acceptance, including some that were uncovered in prior research, such as the quality of the relationship between the parent and child and the hope for grandchildren. Other influences could include prior relationships between the parent and a person with a prominent stigma or difference, and what Allen terms "gay discontinuity," or behavior that suggests that the expressed identity as gay or lesbian could be in question.

Among the most important coping approaches is the development of a sense of coherence as a family (Lavee, McCubbin, & Olson, 1987). This is an especially critical issue when considering family resilience in the face of news that a child is lesbian or gay because the strength of family bonds can be called into question when a member comes out (Waldner & Magruder, 1999).

Family Resiliency

Resilience is defined as "the capacity to rebound from adversity strengthened and more resourceful" (Walsh, 1998, p. 4). It can help individuals "bounce back" to normal

functioning when dealing with difficult situations. Some researchers have considered how families cope with long-term stressors, such as those associated with being a member of a racial or ethnic minority group (McCubbin, McCubbin, Thompson, & Thompson, 1998), or chronic illness (Walsh, 1995). Research has also demonstrated the relationship between resiliency and coping effectively with more acute stressors, such as witnessing a terrorist attack (Alpert & Smith, 2003) or hearing difficult news (McCubbin, Thompson, Thompson, & Futrell, 1999).

The construct of family resilience is rooted in theories of stress coping, positive psychology, and family strength models. Stress theories emphasize the importance of making primary appraisals of the demands of the stressful events and secondary appraisals of one's coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Rutter, 1987). Such appraisals would be implicit in parents' efforts to adapt to the news that they have a lesbian daughter or gay son. If they assess their own coping resources as being inadequate to manage the stress of the news that an offspring is gay or lesbian, parents are likely to use ineffective strategies or attempt to avoid coping completely. Positive psychology emphasizes the importance of learned happiness, or the construction of life events in ways that encourage a positive outlook (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Parents might be able to manage their adaptation more successfully if they have or can develop a positive perspective on their offspring's sexual orientation. Research on family strengths seeks to understand factors that protect families from stressful events (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Stinnett & DeFrain, 1985), including such nonnormative events as developing a positive gay or lesbian identity. There is a paucity of research on which

factors might help parents adjust more effectively to the news that a daughter is lesbian or a son is gay.

Family resiliency can be conceptualized as a set of interactional processes occurring on three levels: individual-to-individual, among units of the family system (such as between the children and the adults), and between the family and its external communities. Challenges to the system require that families balance the demands of the situation with their coping resources and behaviors, based on the meanings they give to the events (Patterson, 2002b). Families would be required to negotiate challenges on all three of these levels in order to adjust successfully to learning that a member is gay or lesbian. Thus, for example, a young person coming out might first confide in a sibling (individual-to-individual), then get the sibling's support in sharing the news with their parents (family system units). The family could then determine the most appropriate strategies to use in various community settings – such as work, social organizations, and places of worship – when issues regarding its member's sexual orientation are involved. Understanding the multitude of these adaptations to different circumstances would be critical in elucidating the patterns that parents demonstrate in their adjustment processes.

The meanings that families develop regarding occurrences in their lives are critical to understanding how those events will affect them (Boss, 1992). Families ascribe situational meanings to events as they appraise the immediate demands they face and their capability of meeting those demands. Over time, families develop patterns of meeting challenges that affect their perceptions of the family unit and contribute to family identity. The concept of family world view describes how members see their family's relationships with the larger systems in which they are embedded (Patterson,

2002a). For parents of lesbians and gay men, all of these levels could come into play as they seek to make coherent meaning of their offsprings' coming out. For example, having accurate information about the nature of homosexuality could improve parents' capacity to meet the challenges of a daughter's or son's coming out. Further, family norms associated with openness about personal issues and the influences of religious and cultural perspectives would likely affect parental acceptance.

In order to assess resilient family functioning, researchers have developed a model called the Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response (FAAR; McCubbin et al., 1999; Patterson, 2002a). In the FAAR approach, several types of demands and resources are evaluated. Demands are categorized as normative (expected stressors, such as the formation of a new family through marriage), nonnormative (those which are unanticipated, such as the death of a child), strains (ongoing structural issues, such as friction between a father and son over many issues), and hassles (daily irritants, such as a family member displaying a habit that distresses others). All of these could affect any family, but the importance of adaptation to the nonnormative stress of learning that a son is gay or a daughter is lesbian would be particularly relevant for these parents.

On the resources side, individual (for example, a member's education) and family system (such as family members' sense of connectedness with one another) resources are assessed. In particular, attention is given to the family's social support and coping strategies (Patterson, 2002b). Among the most important coping approaches is the development of a sense of coherence as a family (Lavee et al., 1987). This would be an especially critical issue to assess when considering family resilience in the face of news

that a child is lesbian or gay because the strength of family bonds can be called into question when a member comes out (Waldner & Magruder, 1999).

Patterson (2002b) noted that "A crisis is very often a turning point for a family, leading to major changes in their structure and/or functioning patterns" (p. 237). If families of lesbians and gay men show resilience, they should be able to adapt to the news of their member's minority sexual orientation and move forward effectively with their core functions: (a) family formation and membership; (b) economic support of members; (c) nurturance, education, and socialization; and (d) protection of vulnerable members (Ooms, 1996).

Because of the complexity of responses defined as resilient, and the unique trajectories that each family takes in exhibiting resiliency, qualitative approaches are particularly well-suited to exploring this phenomenon (Patterson, 2002b). The model is especially applicable to understanding complex, long-term stressors, such as the chronic illness (Patterson, Holm, & Gurney, 2004) or disability of a family member (Morison, Bromfield, & Cameron, 2003), familial depression (Burke, 2003), or the stresses of poverty (Buckner, Mezzacappa, & Beardslee, 2003). Thus, it would also appear to be applicable to the complex, long-term process of adaptation to a family member's coming out.

While some work has been done on resiliency in lesbian and gay individuals (Orban, 2004), very little research has been conducted on resiliency processes among family members of lesbians and gay men. Only Allen (1999) has used a reflexive qualitative method to explore how older parents of adult gay children manage the stigmatization they often experience. Allen suggests that parents use resilient processes to

adapt to their child's non-normative life course. Since this is a relatively understudied area, a basic grounding in the concepts of family resilience can provide guidance in focusing future research directions.

Future Directions

Rather than being seen as a mental disorder, homosexuality has generally become accepted by mental health professionals as a normal element of diversity in society. The complexity of the lives of lesbians and gay men is increasingly emphasized in the literature, including the heightened attention being given to social contexts in which gay men and lesbians live. Family acceptance and support – particularly from parents – are among the areas of key importance to many sexual minority individuals. Thus it is important to understand how these relationships evolve as a family adjusts to the news that a member is lesbian or gay.

There is a small body of literature describing initial parental reactions to the coming out of a gay son or lesbian daughter, and some information on parents' perspectives as assessed at later points in time. Generally, the research suggests that parents' attitudes become more accepting of their children's minority sexual orientation over time (Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Cramer & Roach, 1988). Researchers are only beginning to understand the particular processes that parents experience in adapting to their children's sexual minority status – that is, the insights and experiences that parents have that catalyze changes from less- to more-accepting attitudes (Savin-Williams, 2001). Future research may help to elucidate this process.

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CHAPTER 2

IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AS THE PARENT OF A LESBIAN OR GAY MALE

Introduction and Literature Review

Theorists have recently proposed a "new Big Five" set of principles to integrate research on the construct of personality (McAdams & Pals, 2006). One of these five overarching concepts is the importance of narrative in defining one's identity. Narrative accounts of one's life are viewed as critical to the process of identity development (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992). McAdams (2001) asserts that identities can best be understood as people's "integrative life stories that provide their lives with unity and purpose" (p. 106). While significant attention has been given to adolescent identity development (Erikson & Coles, 2000; Meeus, 1996; van der Veer, 1996), less is understood about the changes in identity that can occur as a result of life transformations in middle or later adulthood. This article will explore a specific life transition that affects some individuals, most often at middle age, that is, the development of identity as the parent of a gay male or lesbian.

According to McAdams and Pals (2006), the internal narrative functions as a tool to provide coherence and meaning to one's sense of identity. As people encounter new events, they attempt to incorporate their understandings of these experiences into their life stories in ways that are consistent with their current beliefs and values. When

heterosexual parents imagine the future for themselves and their children, they rarely include the possibility of a minority sexual orientation.

McAdams (2001) described identity as “an integrative tendency in selfhood” (p. 102). It is precisely because of the “dis-integrating” impact on their identities of the news that they have a sexual minority child that these parents often struggle to adapt.

The belief that personal growth and transformation can result from adjusting to difficult life events is an ancient one (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).Researchers are beginning to study this phenomenon, now called posttraumatic growth, and elucidate the conditions and consequences of its emergence (Aldwin & Levenson, 2004; Pals & McAdams, 2004). Tedeschi and Calhoun’s model suggested that the most important factor contributing to posttraumatic growth is cognitive processing of the emotional impact of the precipitating event. Pals and McAdams challenged the centrality of cognitive processes, instead focusing on the importance of two narrative approaches in promoting personal growth after a trauma: (a) an explicit acknowledgement of the impact of the event on current schemas; and (b) the construction of logically consistent, positive outcomes from resolving the challenging events. This latter element is sometimes described as a demonstration of redemptive themes, and these seem to be particularly prevalent in the narratives of generative adults (McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997).

Another element of narrative understandings of personal growth is offered by Tappan (1999), who argued that moral identity development is essentially dialogical in nature, that is, it evolves in the context of linguistic interactions between oneself and one’s social context. Pratt and colleagues have found moral development to be a key

component of posttraumatic growth both for adolescents (Pratt, Arnold, & Mackey, 2001) and adults (Pratt, Norris, Arnold, & Filyer, 1999; Pratt & Norris, 1999).

Typically, lesbians and gay males reveal their sexual orientation to one or more friends before any family members are told (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; D'Augelli & Patterson, 2001). This does not suggest that coming out to parents is unimportant; rather, it is because of its significance that youth are cautious about initiating this disclosure (Floyd & Stein, 2002; Savin-Williams, 2001). Most sexual minority youth report that they want strong family ties (Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001; Savin-Williams, 1989, 1996), and that a major motivation for coming out to parents is the desire for enhanced closeness (Savin-Williams, 2001). Research has demonstrated that, for both youth and their parents, the parental reaction to the child's coming out is a critical component of their postdisclosure relationship (Ben-Ari, 1995).

While much of the early research in this area focused on initial parental reactions, some investigators have suggested that parents' responses evolve over time in a pattern similar to that of other developmental progressions. Several studies have indicated that parental reactions appear to be stage-like. For example, DeVine (1983-1984) posited that parents' reactions parallel the stages of homosexual identity development outlined by Cass (1979). Similarly, although some researchers (Anderson, 1987; Robinson, Walters, & Skeen, 1989) suggest that parental adjustment follows a pattern similar to the grief reaction outlined by Kübler-Ross (1969), others have found that changes in parental reactions do not conform to any previously recognized patterns (Ben-Ari, 1995; Crosbie-Burnett, Foster, Murray, & Bowen, 1996).

Phenomenological research has suggested that certain themes are common for many parents. Psychological themes have included worries about causality (Bernstein, 1990); panic, sadness, and a feeling of loss (Saltzburg, 2004); fear for the child's safety (Beeler & DiProva, 1999); introspection, and personal growth (Boxer, Cook, & Herdt, 1991). Interpersonally, Saltzburg noted that some withdraw for a time from their parental roles. Other parents are able to move toward a committed affirmation of homosexuality and become activists for gay rights (Vernaglia, 2000). As Beeler and DiProva described it, "acceptance and integration are, perhaps, not an end point but, in an important way, a beginning point" (p. 454).

In the present study, I sought to develop a model of how parents adapt over time to the news that they have a gay son or a lesbian daughter. In particular, I intended to explore how parents understand the changes they experience as they come to terms with their children's sexual minority status. Because the process itself was the focus of the study, a grounded theory methodology was selected.

Method

Participants

A total of 17 parents participated in semi-structured interviews on the topic of how they had adjusted to learning that they have a gay son or a lesbian daughter. Two couples preferred to be interviewed together, resulting in 15 interviews. Seven of the participants had been divorced at some point, though only two were currently unmarried. All participants were European American, middle-aged or older parents (ages ranged from mid-40s to early 80s) currently living in the southeastern United States. In each

case, their children had told them of their sexual orientation at least 4 years prior to the interviews. In this report, participants are represented by pseudonyms.

Procedure

As a person who is heterosexual and who has no close homosexual relatives, I spent considerable time developing a participant network. I became active in a local chapter of the support group Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). I visited other PFLAG chapters and helped staff a booth at two large gay pride parades to seek participants. Initial interest came from the individuals contacted through these means, with the remainder being recommended by others who were interviewed, a snowball technique.

I talked with each potential participant on the telephone to explain the research and determine if he or she met eligibility criteria. No incentives were offered other than to provide participants with a summary of research findings.

The semi-structured interview protocol was developed based on a review of the research literature on gay and lesbian identity development (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2000), parental reactions to a child's coming out (Allen, 1999; Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Ben-Ari, 1995; Saltzburg, 2002; Savin-Williams, 2001), posttraumatic growth (Pals & McAdams, 2004), and moral identity development (Tappan, 1999). Each interview lasted between 1-4 hours. Participants were encouraged to describe their initial reactions when their sons or daughters came out to them as homosexual. They were also asked to discuss changes that they had experienced since that time. In one instance, the parents (being interviewed as a couple) reported having experienced no adjustment process–even though

they had initially reported on the telephone that they did experience changes–so their data were not included in this analysis.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed, and analyses were performed with the assistance of the N6 software program. Consistent with the research question, which was to outline a theory of parental adjustment to a child's homosexuality, a grounded theory methodology was selected. I followed procedures outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990) for grounded theory analysis.

First, each transcript was read several times, and open codes were created from elements that appeared to be relevant to parents' adjustment. Open codes were then combined into general categories which were dimensionalized using constant comparative approaches. Connections among categories were explored. Finally, the conditions, strategies, and consequences of the categories were examined to develop the final theory.

Steps to achieve trustworthiness via credibility, transferability, and confirmability were employed. Credibility was achieved by the use of a faculty advisor, a European American, heterosexual professor with expertise in multicultural counseling and research, who continually reviewed the coding of the transcripts and engaged in an ongoing process of discussions and feedback sessions with the main investigator. Establishing transferability was accomplished by providing "thick descriptions" of participant's responses. For each phase of adjustment, a detailed description of the participant's experience was identified using direct quotations. To enhance transferability further, cross-case analysis was employed. Cross-case analysis enables the researcher to

obtain a deeper understanding of the conditions under which the phenomena occur (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Transcripts were reread to identify patterns that cut across participants. In addition to recognizing recurring patterns, this method was employed to identify any exceptions. Confirmability was established by the use of an auditor, a European American, male, master's-level counseling student engaged in multiple studies related to issues of sexual orientation. The auditor examined the transcripts and resulting theory and concluded that the organization, coding, and interpretation of the transcription data were detailed and thorough and that theory development was consistent during the research process.

Results

The parents in this study appeared to experience three broad phases of adjustment. When they first learned that a daughter was lesbian or a son was gay, emotional responses dominated. Once they could manage the emotions–a process that could take a year or longer–parents generally used more behavioral and cognitive strategies to understand and feel more comfortable with gay-related situations. Eventually, they came to a point at which moral and spiritual issues were primary. In addition, many parents described milestone events, similar to what Savin-Williams (2001) called "turning points," which occur when the trajectory of the pattern changes. This is not to suggest that parents moved in lockstep through these developmental sequences; on the contrary, there were many variations and cycling back through elements as new challenges emerged. The overall evolution of their experiences did seem to follow this basic progression, however.

Early Adjustment

Initially, the dominant responses from parents whose child had just come out to them were emotionally-focused. Shock, denial, anxiety, anger, and confusion were notable. Parents typically became completely focused on the issue and could think of little else for a period of time. Even those aspects of their experiences that were cognitive, behavioral, or spiritual and moral tended to have emotional overtones. This is consistent with early research on parental responses to a child's coming out, which found many negative reactions (Boxer et al., 1991; Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Strommen, 1989). Also consistent with prior research (Ben-Ari, 1995; Griffin, Wirth, & Wirth, 1986; Herdt & Boxer, 1993; LaSala, 2000; Robinson et al., 1989), reported parental responses included shock, shame, and fear for their child's safety. Self-blame and guilt were also evident. Parents reported regret that they had somehow failed their children; confusion; denial of their child's reported sexual orientation; anger at the child, themselves, or God; and depression. Successful coping appeared to depend on successful emotional regulation (Aldwin & Levenson, 2004).

Emotional dimensions. Shock and disbelief were almost universal among these parents. Sally Jenkins' experience was typical:

> I found these books and I said to John [her husband], I was flipping here and I said, "Here, these books are for you," because I thought they were *Playboy*. And then I looked at them again and [it] said *Blue Boy* and I, God, my knees buckled. I just didn't . . . I was not expecting that. I was so blindsided. But your brain is a remarkable thing. [speaking in a whisper] We put everything back the way it was, didn't say a word, and for three months I didn't even think about it. I just shut down, didn't even consider it, it's truly amazing.

Fears were also common early in the process of adaptation. Some parents were afraid for their child's safety from a variety of sources, including prejudice and hate

crimes. Another concern, especially for sons, was that their children might contract the AIDS virus. Other parents' anxieties were more focused on the possibility that friends and family members would discover their family secret. Many parents recalled a general sense of uncertainty and confusion about this time period. Some hoped it was a phase or a time of questioning by their children. For example, Paul Baker said

> And to be very honest, when she made that statement, I really wasn't sure she was a lesbian or not. She's 12 years old. Kids explore . . . and you know, to me, it could be an exploration, it could be for real.

In other cases, such as in this exchange between Linda and Robbie Robertson, the whole period seemed to be a blur:

> Linda: So you don't even remember that first week, few days?
> Robbie: I don't know if I have tuned it out, but it's all this, it's in the past and I don't really, don't remember what happened, I really don't.
> Linda: I think one reason for that is because of the timing, with his graduation coming up . . . and we just had to push it down, we had to push all our feelings down and forget about it! That's probably why you have forgotten. 'Cause I don't remember anything in between, I don't remember anything until his graduation party.

Mary Sanders summed up the experience that many had:

> The whole process, when you're going through it, is very emotional. One thing I can remember is when I first heard that my son was gay, in spite of me being accepting on like a rational, intelligent level, emotionally, I still felt a mess . . . It was like being told somebody in your family is dying of terminal illness or something, you know. It's the only thing occupying your mind until you can process your emotions and get your arms around it and figure out what's what.

Cognitive and behavioral dimensions. An important early issue for many parents was the question of causality. Some worried that their actions had resulted in their children's becoming gay. Louise Anderson asked herself, "Was my husband too

controlling? Was I too controlling over what she did? Were we too restrictive with her that she turned to females?"

Others felt that outsiders might have played a role, such as described by Penny Edwards: "I was concerned that he had been brainwashed, that he really wasn't [gay], that he had been brainwashed into that way. And so I was not willing to give in to that." The Edwards family was also among those who sought therapy in an attempt to change their child's sexual orientation:

> Penny: We spent thousands of dollars on counseling for that. . . . And when you don't get the right answer, I took him to somebody else. I knew the answer I wanted. And that was that he is confused and we can work it out. And seriously, when I could tell they were not going to give me that answer, I found somebody else. Actually we went to three.
>
> Me: Did you ever find anyone who told you . . .
>
> Penny: No.
>
> Jim: We had one who was almost leaning to for enough money. [laughter] . . . He was in that little old trailer park house or whatever. He was pitiful. [laughter] But he came closest to telling us what we wanted than anybody.

During the initial phase of adjustment, many parents disengaged from their normal support networks. Most who did so, such as Linda Robertson, believed that others wouldn't understand their situation:

> I think it was 6 months we finally saw our friends again or something, but I was so nervous. We went to a movie, I remember that, and [a friend] came and sat beside me and took my arm and said, "How are you honey?" And I said, "Don't talk to me, can't talk, can't talk." . . . It was a long time, at least a year, before I could even talk about being, to anyone about Wade being gay. Just couldn't do it.

Some described their experience as did Samuel Jenkins: "When you find out that your kid is gay, you go into the closet and you hide right along with them and you don't say anything to anybody. I thought that's what everybody did."

Many parents reported that emotional support from their lesbian daughters and gay sons was critically important to their coping during this time. For example, Sarah Light said, “I thought maybe they’re different or something. I had no idea and of course, they're not. And so, that was helpful, and that just is through not just one sit-down-and-talk conversation, it's been an ongoing dialogue.”

Moral and spiritual dimensions. It was during this initial phase when parents began to ask existential questions about the issue of homosexuality. Linda Robertson’s experience was illustrative:

> I didn’t sleep any that whole night [when her son came out to his parents]. I kept thinking about him being killed before he’s 21, dying of AIDS. . . . I cried out in the middle of the night and said, “Why God? Why did you do this to me? Why did you do this to my son?” I think I knew right off the bat, you know, or this is my belief, that God made him this way. And I was so mad at God ‘cause He done this to us, and done this to him, and he wasn’t going to live. He was going to be beat up, and on the street, or I was so afraid.

The moral and spiritual implications of their children’s homosexuality were generally not fully explored at this time, however, as more immediate questions were of greater concern for parents.

Turning points. Consistent with Bauer and McAdams’ (2004) concepts of how people characteristically make meaning of life events, these parents differed widely in their descriptions of the changes that signaled a turning point in their adaptation. Those with what Bauer and McAdams call an integrative style seemed to use more cognitive adaptive strategies. The hallmark of the integrative style is the ability to think in complex ways about oneself and one’s interactions with others. Several integrative parents reported that negotiating relationship issues with the child was an important milestone. For example, Jim and Penny Edwards knew that they had reached a turning point when

they were able to welcome their son's boyfriend into their home. Sally Jenkins became aware that nothing in the gay culture seemed unusual or odd to her any longer.

Parents who were more emotionally-oriented tended to follow what Bauer and McAdams (2004) describe as intrinsic growth approaches. For instance, Tammy Little found that she had reached a turning point when she could laugh about the issue of her son's sexual orientation. Some were even able to combine both, as suggested by Linda Robertson's description of finding the website for the support group PFLAG: "I couldn't even talk to anybody without bursting into tears. I couldn't tell anybody, I couldn't talk to anybody, but that website was a lifesaver as well. It was my angel."

Middle Adjustment

During the middle period of adjustment, parents tended to emphasize cognitive and behavioral strategies. These approaches included seeking information and support related to issues of sexual orientation. Emotional responses were related to patterns of family dynamics within both the nuclear and extended families. These dynamics began to take on a more prominent role in the adjustment process.

Emotional dimensions. Emotional struggles during this period centered on the perspectives of other people. Most found that attitudes among family members were mixed; some were supportive, while others were either overtly negative or quietly disapproving. For example, Penny and Jim Edwards described their families' attitudes:

Jim:	Penny's family acted like I wanted my family to act. It was so easy; they didn't necessarily agree with it, but they go . . .
Penny:	They didn't disagree with it, they just didn't know anything about it.
Jim:	". . . But we love Nick. *My* family said that – my mother, my dad. My dad just doesn't say anything; he's an engineer. Anyway, Mom said that. She was as nice to Nick as any grandmother could be, but this changed things. She said she

> loved Nick. I just think she is so uncomfortable with the whole thing . . .
>
> Penny: She doesn't know how to relate to him.
>
> Jim: She does not have . . . it's as if he's a different person now. . . . And I basically showed my *ss pretty good to my mother. I was mean to my mother! I guess I was . . .
>
> Penny: You were honest with your mother.
>
> Jim: I was honest, but it came across as mean because I guess I was so angry at this church . . . As long as there's no controversy, everything's all nice and we can sing hymns and everything. And I said, 'This is your grandson, and they're discriminating against your grandson. And you're going to take it lying down and just everything's la-de-dah.' Now I wanted her to stand up, I wanted her to say something. That's not her. It never has been her, and it never will be her. But it made me angry that she wouldn't say anything.

Mary Sanders noted the particular challenges she faced as a divorced parent regarding support of her son:

> So many people come through PFLAG who had a similar religious conservative background. Many of those folks couldn't readily accept their child and support them, and in fact, Mark's [her son's] father could not. And so in Mark's family, being split by divorce, on my side he had my love and support, and we were doing activist activities together. And then my family found out and he immediately had their love and support. And I mean everybody openly said to him, "It's okay, we love you, it's fine. There's no issue here" kind of a thing.

Cognitive and behavioral dimensions. It was during the middle period of adjustment that most parents put significant time and effort toward learning about homosexuality. Many, such as Linda Robertson, read about gay and lesbian issues:

> I started reading and reading and reading and reading and learning everything I could. I educated myself about homosexuality and everything. . . . I'd Xerox stuff and show it to Robbie [her husband], and I'd say, "Look Robbie, there's something written by a mother. Really it's good, you need to read this." You know, and on and on.

Maggie Johnson echoed this sentiment:

> I think if you can get as educated as possible about homosexuality and it's a, you know, sexual orientation like heterosexuality is. I don't think people

> decide that, sort of like, you know, we were talking about it, like we don't decide to be heterosexuals, we just are.

In general, parents who were able to attribute sexual orientation to inborn causes were more likely to be accepting than those who thought that there was some element of choice in the matter or that they had somehow caused their son or daughter to be homosexual.

Many parents found that they had to come to terms with the fact that they would not see some of their expectations realized for their children. Sally Jenkins said,

> . . . all the things that you dream about when you have a baby. You give them a name, you decide what school he is going to, what clothes they're going to wear, everything. You are in complete control of it, so of course, you just continue that [laughter]. You know, and then they don't do what you want. How dare they, don't they know I'm the boss?

In particular, several respondents mentioned the difficulty they had in accepting the idea that they would presumably not have grandchildren from this child. Wanda Reeves made the point in this way:

> And then, then you start worrying about grandchildren. It's funny [laughs]. You don't think about grandchildren, but it occurred to both of us, my former husband and I, separately, as we heard it separately. Oh boy, what about grandchildren? . . . I'm almost ashamed to say, I said to my son, ". . . if you find a compatible partner, you'd make a wonderful father. I think you should consider adopting a child with him." It's just shameless, this hunger [for grandchildren].

Most parents struggled to come to terms with the awareness of what their children would experience in a homophobic society. In some cases, they chose to distance themselves from family members or friends who weren't accepting, such as described by Linda Robertson when talking about her mother's reactions:

> It was every time I went home, and she would bring it up. And she was totally different, she was like, "I can't believe you accept him." And I'd say, "Well, I thought you did." And she'd say, "No, I would never say anything to him, but you are his mom and you need to be getting him

> counseling. And I pray for him every night that he is going to change." I mean, we have had so many of these bad scenes. I can't begin to tell you how many. We haven't had any for about the last year because I finally just have shut her out. I basically have shut her out of my life.

Behavioral strategies were critically important to parents during this time period as well. Sally and Samuel Jenkins spent considerable time in an area of their city known to be gay-friendly, which she described as "immersion therapy." In addition to becoming more comfortable with some unique elements of gay culture, many parents commented on their growing awareness of the similarities between their gay and straight friends, which they found to be far more basic and numerous than any differences.

A number of parents noted the particular value of lesbian and gay mentors in enhancing their growing understanding of gay issues. Irene Luke sought out a lesbian colleague who researched issues related to homosexuality:

> I went to her and I said, "What do I need to do to be able to support Lisa [her daughter]?" . . . She told me some of the research, but . . . the most helpful thing was just talking through some of the like, everyday things. Lisa really is wondering, like who to tell and who not to tell. And at this point, I said, "I'm not telling anybody. I told Jim [her husband]." And she's like, "O.K., well I'm glad you told him but don't tell anybody else." I said, "I'm not. I couldn't not tell him." And it was issues like that, about who to tell."

Sally Jenkins and Tammy Little had the same mentor, a gay man who helped start a PFLAG chapter in their city. Here's how Sally described his impact on her life:

> And he is the one who was so gentle, so sweet, and he said, "Use me for your sounding board. You can ask me anything." He said, "I know you don't want to talk to your son about it." And that's the truth, you know, because you think you are the only one with the gay kid. . . . Jeremy was really, really helpful with that. And I remember him saying, he looked me straight in the eye after the meeting, and he would come over to me and say, "Mother dear, your dreams are not his." And [I'd think] "God damn it! What do you know?" But he planted a seed, and I got off my high horse and started listening.

Most parents also found that maintaining strong connections with their children was valuable during this time. For some, the son or daughter helped to introduce them to the gay community. Many family members had long discussions about issues related to coming out, negotiating relationship rules, and similar practical topics. Helen Richardson talked about the importance of staying connected with her child, even though they had earlier grown somewhat estranged. She described having to push through a "prickly barrier" that he had erected, which she now believes was an effort to protect himself from what he thought would be a non-accepting attitude by his parents.

> He began to look at me and value me because I was the mother that was there, when other mothers were not. . . . One of the things that he liked to do was shop, and I just absolutely am not a shopper. But he liked to shop, and so we would spend time together and that's what we would do. . . . He loved to pick out clothes for me.

Moral and spiritual dimensions. Parents began to examine and redefine their commitments to their belief systems and values when those came into conflict with their growing understanding of lesbian and gay oppression. Some parents became estranged from their faith communities, such as described by Louise Anderson:

> I still haven't gone back to church. . . . I did for the first year, but I was too angry and I still haven't worked through it. You know, I miss my faith, but I don't know how to deal with going back, and everybody loved Catherine [her lesbian daughter] because she was there every week. And you know they ask about her, and I can't tell somebody that, I don't feel comfortable.

In other cases, parents changed their church affiliations, as did Robbie and Linda Robertson:

> Robbie: We were in the Methodist church for a long time. . . . And then, oh I don't know, a year or so ago, the . . . conference voted to . . . condemn gay marriage. And our pastor . . . we thought he was very liberal, and he sent the letter supporting the conference and their stand. And I looked at Linda, and said, 'I can't go back to the Methodist church again. I'm

> through, that's it.' And we'd always gone to the Methodist church, give them money. And I said, 'I'll never set foot'.
>
> Linda: And I went and met with . . . our local minister, for a 3-hour conference. I didn't sway him one bit, not one bit. . . . He was very congenial and he said, he doesn't have children, but he said, 'If I did, I think I'd be doing the same thing you're doing.' He said, 'I agree with you. I would support my child.' He said, 'I cannot support it.' And I said, 'Okay. Well here's our letter [of resignation] and we are going to the MCC church [Metropolitan Community Church, founded to be gay-affirmative].' And we have never been happier."

For some parents, their commitments to their churches took a different turn. Bobby Hall is a long-time minister in a denomination that strongly condemns homosexuality as a sin. When his son came out, Bobby initially sought to change his son's sexual orientation through therapy. When that was unsuccessful, he and his wife, Hannah, accepted that this aspect of their son's life wouldn't change, and that they must adapt to it:

> I decided very early on, I didn't understand it, but my relationship with my son was more important than anything. I needed to support him as best I could. . . . And, I guess somewhere in this I began to realize that um, I could not pick . . . who they chose to live with, who they chose to love. But [pause] it was a struggle. But it got easier.

Their daughter Joan, a lesbian, came out to them much later. She was also instrumental in increasing the church's membership by reaching out to lesbians and gays in the community. Hannah explained:

> The church [where Bobby is the minister] is in an old community so that the people have died off since we've been back. And we got down to about four members who were coming in any regular amount. He [Bobby] tried to decide if he wanted to close the church but neither one of us ever felt that that was the thing to do. So Joan . . . finally she came back to [their home town] and she was going to [the largest church in the community] and met so many gays and they just were discontented and they were just not accepted. So she started inviting them out to her church and they would come. . . . And the kids started coming and the people accepted them. They have never made any difference. They see them as people, and if they have any idea they are gay, I don't know. You know it's just

> something that we don't actually talk about. They are people and the folks love them. So we run 30 in church now.

Joan eventually became a minister in the same church, which has a tradition of local decisions regarding ordination. While they hope to be able to maintain their affiliation with their denomination, they have not let that desire sway their actions in this regard.

Turning points. Parents' efforts to learn more about homosexuality and reconsider their values led many to make very clear commitments toward their sons and daughters. Some, such as Samuel Jenkins, became more public and assertive in standing up for the rights of their children:

> At work at first, I couldn't, I didn't say anything. And then I would hear the jokes about the gays and things like that. And after a while I started, when I would hear them telling a gay joke, I would walk over and when everybody started to laugh, I would say, "What's so funny about that?" and I would just kill their punch line. And that was kind of my way of starting to come out at work.

Some parents became aware that other issues were much more important than that of sexual orientation, such as described by Mary Sanders, when she discovered that her son had a drug addiction:

> It's also given me a perspective because you know, being concerned about your child being gay is nothing compared to when you go through something seriously life-threatening like an addiction problem. I mean it really puts things into perspective that, you know, everyone has issues and their life to deal with, but the important life-and-death ones, being gay is not! [laugh]

For some parents, the awareness that they were experiencing personal development and growth was an important milestone. Robbie Robertson put it this way: "I guess I kind of think that if your relationship with your child changes after they tell you, it's you that has changed, not them."

Later Adjustment

By the later phases of the adjustment process, parents' commitment to their new values was dramatic, and in many ways had become self-defining. This element affected all aspects of their adjustment, including the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral realms. In addition to their changed self-perceptions, most parents in this study demonstrated public support for lesbian and gay issues. Many parents reported that they were better people, that they were happy that they had experienced this process, and in particular, that they had grown much closer to their children than they had ever been before.

Emotional dimensions. Many parents expressed a realization that they had come to accept their children for who they are, rather than for who they wanted them to be. Several parents explicitly stated that the most important thing was to love their children for who they are as people, rather than focusing on their sexual orientation. For example, Linda Robertson said,

> As long as they are not hurting themselves and long as they are not hurting anyone else, and that takes in anything you can think of really; it does, doesn't it? As long as you've got those two bases covered and they're a fine citizen, and a fine person, then leave them alone and just love them. Love them for who they are, and love them like you did when they were two years old and you had control of them. . . . And don't base your relationship with your child on how you think they ought to be living their lives. You know, that's their problem, that's their life.

Nancy Smith reported that she found her children more interesting once they came out to her, while Mary Sanders recognized that the experience brought her–as well as other family members–closer to her son:

> It does give everyone the chance to offer each other unconditional love and support and I think that's the best thing about having a gay child, is that it gives you an opportunity to examine and learn, if you haven't already, what your role as a parent really is, which is to provide unconditional love and support to your child. But in our family, our larger family, I felt that it gave us all that opportunity where my parents, and my

> sister and brother-in-law all reached out to us and purposely had calls and conversations to say, "This is not a big deal at all. We love Mark. You know, this is not an issue, we're completely behind you." And that kind of to me is what families should be about. But sometimes you don't have that opportunity on a day-to-day basis. You're just walking along until some event like this happens and then you see how the family responds.

Cognitive and behavioral dimensions. Much like in the emotional realm, parents' changing values systems affected many aspects of their thinking and behavior. A number of parents reported that they have become more compassionate and sensitive to others, especially those from marginalized groups. Tammy Little, who has a gay son and two lesbian daughters, said,

> I'm very tolerant. I also am very aware that the person that you're talking to may not be the person you think. You don't know where they're coming from. I've become very sensitive about other people's feelings. Not that I'm not – I'm very outspoken, but I am very, very sensitive to other people.

Tammy's earlier reputation for, as she called it, "ambushing" people who showed intolerance regarding lesbians and gay men was widely known among PFLAG parents, two of whom related a story that I later asked her about. She described a situation in which she was interacting with a man who stated that he could "pick a fag out of any crowd." Even when challenged by others in the conversation, he continued to insist that he could "spot all of them." She replied, "Well, I guarantee you can't pick out their mothers. I am one and you didn't even know it!" Even in such situations, however, Tammy believed that the individuals who expressed such sentiments were ignorant rather than being bad people.

A number of participants described their connections with people in the gay community as another source of appreciation. Nancy Smith called herself "more gay than they [her two gay children] are." Linda Robertson described herself as "more gay than

straight" and called her gay friends "better people" than her straight friends. Several commented that parents who accept their lesbian and gay children are treated like celebrities in the gay community.

Several parents drew parallels to other social injustices, including intolerance based on race, religion, physical size, and financial means. Some acknowledged the broader issues of power and privilege that go along with such prejudices, as did Sally Jenkins, when describing being at a large gay pride parade:

> [A lesbian friend] said "You were a minority." And I said, "I didn't think of it that way." . . . it's like black and white. . . . I said, "Because whitey has the power, you take the white man for granted". . . . I don't think about myself as a minority.

For other parents, prior efforts to address their own and others' prejudices in different realms were valuable when facing this issue. For example, Wanda Reeves said,

> So in terms of religion, I had to go through a real struggle . . . when I became radicalized as a feminist. . . . I knew God wasn't a man but I sure was taught that God was male. And the idea that God might have feminine traits was part of goddess worship, it was pagan. You never, ever could consider that. And so I began to see that what I was taught in church in terms of religion and gender roles was patriarchal. But I think that's also responsible for the attitude of religion toward people like my [gay] son.

Becoming more assertive about addressing expressions of intolerance by others became important to many parents. Some were quite challenging of others, such as Robbie Robertson, when describing some people with whom he works:

> They're old-time Southern Baptists but I don't care if they approve of it or not. . . . But don't come around running your mouth or you're going to get in trouble with me, 'cause I have a temper and I'll fly off the handle real quick. And, so if you ignore it, fine, I'll ignore it and we won't talk about it and I don't have a problem with that. But come around running your mouth and we'll have a problem.

Other parents, such as Mary Sanders, saw their efforts in more educational terms:

> And so I think in time you begin to feel more confident about having those conversations where they're not so much about a personal conversation, they're more about educating the person that may just not have been aware or been exposed to families who have a gay family member. And so it's just little ways that you can begin to share with folks, "Well, hey, my family has a gay child." So I think that it's just a matter of processing, and as you get comfortable with your family dynamics having changed, being able to talk about that with other people.

Wanda Reeves made the connection that parents confront others because of the impact that intolerance has on their children:

> That's what I think you *have* to do as a parent. You have to make people confront their own fears and prejudices. And in the name of family love – that's real family values, as far as I'm concerned – love this person in your midst. This person needs you.

Not all parents chose to be vocal advocates for gay rights, however, and several described situations in which they struggled to determine the best course of action when confronted with non-affirming attitudes of others. Sarah Light shared a conversation she had with a cousin about her niece, a lesbian:

> I never see her and I thought, I just never said anything. And I don't know whether I should have, but what it would have done would be to have alienated us, I know, because she was just so negative. I don't know, it's just very difficult if someone comes out like that to then say, "Well, then my son is gay." Well, maybe, I've often wondered if maybe I should do that, but then yet at the same time, I don't know. Maybe I still have a difficulty with it with people who are accepting. I don't know.

Several of those interviewed had become politically active on behalf of gay and lesbian causes. Nancy Smith was one such parent:

> You know, we're becoming political. Did I ever think that I would be political? Never in a million years! We're very political, we're very much out there in the community, uh, in the gay and lesbian community. I mean, people know that we are, you know, a hundred, a hundred and fifty percent activists. . . . I'm not gonna go to my grave without putting up a fight to make sure that our kids are gonna have the rights that, you know, Bob [her husband] and I have. And, and that's why we are getting so

> involved as, you know, we are. And we know that there's so many young people, or even middle-aged people who don't have supportive families. And that's why we like to go into the gay community to eat, to talk to people. So that they know that, you know, there are nice people.

Moral and spiritual dimensions. Clearly, the most essential thing that these parents came to understand was that their love for their children was their highest value; this awareness was woven throughout every story. Several noted that they had seen families torn apart when the parents could not accept their children's sexual orientation. These parents knew that they must deal with the issue of homosexuality directly because they wanted to continue to be part of their children's lives.

Far beyond the desire simply to stay connected, however, was the belief by a number of these parents that having a lesbian daughter or a gay son has changed them for the better. For example, Linda Robertson said,

> I wouldn't have it any other way. He has just added so much to our lives and changed me, oh my goodness, he just turned all my thoughts, all my values upside down. And I love it. I'm a much better person now, much more accepting, much more outgoing and open-minded.

Helen Richardson, the mother whose experiences were the catalyst for this research, also spoke about the evolution of her values:

> Maybe that's it. Maybe it goes to valuing. Because you can accept something, and that's kind of tolerance. But when you begin to appreciate it and value it for its own sake, that's beyond that, and I think that that's perhaps what you're looking at, where you begin to value and understand that they, that they're the unique . . . people that they are because of this. And so then you have to accept it but [also] value it, because it makes them who they are. . . . But then what I began to value was the friendships and the relationships that I saw. Because of the fact that so often, the homosexual community has to get from one another what they can't get from their own families, or you know, from the outside world.

She went on to describe why she became an AIDS educator after her son's death:

> Whatever it is, and we use it in a positive way, and that takes away the negative power of things. I think that there's a certain destiny. . . . that's

> the kind of feeling I have, when I talk to kids about the issues. . . . I'm doing what comes completely, totally, absolutely naturally. . . . I feel like I would not have those opportunities, if I had not gone through what I'd gone through with Bruce.

Penny Edwards summarized her personal growth in this way:

> I really thought I was a good person before Nick came out, but I think now what I am is [pause] what I always thought was a *compassionate* person. Now my compassion has deepened. . . . One of my favorite scriptures was, "When you do it unto the least of these, you do it unto me." . . . I just never really knew that my family would be "the least of these." . . . And I realized that being the least of these is really a blessing because you've opened your heart up to all of those others who are the least of these and you just find out that you're just better off.

Louise Anderson put it simply: "People are people, I think, no matter where you go. I think they all have a heart, and that's probably the most important thing."

Turning points. Some of the parents in this study eventually came to view their emerging identities as the parents of lesbians or gay males as central to who they are. These parents could not imagine their lives without this element and embraced the personal growth that they had experienced to achieve this turning point. For example, Wanda Richardson summarized her change in self-identity in this way:

> I think in all aspects of my life, in my job as an educator; and in my job as a church member, and my religion, in my two marriages, in my relationship with my larger family, my aunts and uncles, my nieces and nephews, my sister, I've come out, so to speak as a gay parent, as a parent of a gay child. That's a decision you have to make as a gay parent. Every aspect of your life, if you're a gay parent, you have to re-think. Whether it's spiritual, or professional, or social, or relational/family - all of it.

Discussion

With few exceptions, parents were shocked and distressed when they learned that a daughter was lesbian or a son was gay. Parents discovered that cognitive and behavioral strategies helped them to understand more about homosexuality and to become more comfortable with gay culture. They described a series of experiences that challenged their

current conceptualizations of spiritual and moral certainty, and they revised those conceptualizations to address their changing moral understandings. Most came to see themselves as part of an important network of supporters for all of the gay community.

All of the parents who participated in this study of adaptation to the news that they had a lesbian daughter or a gay son initially viewed their children's coming out to them as a challenging–if not traumatic–event. All came to believe, however, that they experienced personal growth and development as a result. These parents constructed stories of positive personal transformation including all of the elements outlined by McAdams (2001) for a life story model of identity: setting, scene, character, plot, and theme. Over time, many of these parents incorporated both the challenges and their resulting personal development into an integrated and evolving life narrative that they viewed as self-defining.

These results are consistent with current research on posttraumatic growth. The parents in this study explicitly acknowledged that their children's coming out to them was difficult, that it caused them to question some of their deeply-held values. In the process of adjusting to this news, they also created meaningful and consistent new frameworks for understanding the world and their place in it. They reconstructed their life narratives to accommodate, and eventually to value, the experience.

It is clear that the nomothetic, or one-size-fits-all, approach to theory development is being supplanted by more complex conceptualizations, such as that offered by Savin-Williams (2001). He suggested that the phrase "differential developmental trajectories" be used to describe some of the ways in which minority sexual identity development is constant across individuals, typical of many individuals, and unique to

each individual. As an example, virtually all families are faced with the process of separation-individuation as a part of adolescent identity formation, a component of which is developing romantic relationships (Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Several parents in this study noted, however, that most gay or lesbian teens are delayed in exploring this realm. For instance, few would take a same-sex date to a high school prom. More specific factors, such as individual personality traits, family background, and cultural context, would also influence this process.

The participants in this study were all facing a nonnormative life event that presented them with particular challenges. How should I feel about my child? How should I situate myself within my social context on the basis of this new information? How have other parents managed similar transitions? Many of the experiences of these parents were broadly consistent, but there were numerous variations within those themes. For example, some parents sought information from colleagues, others were more focused on reading, while still others found that the information that they gained through support groups was especially valuable. Those parents who took advantage of information and support networks, whether formal or informal, reported that they benefited from them. Learning more about the nature of the challenges they faced and recognizing that they were not facing them alone were helpful understandings.

Finally, it is important to note that the phases described in these results were not discrete entities through which all parents moved in lockstep. There was significant overlap in emphases, and parents often cycled back through various phases as new challenges arose. It was clear, however, that the parents themselves saw the process as including a sense of developmental progression and personal growth.

Limitations and Future Research

The parents who participated in this study were, as a group, quite accepting of their children's sexual orientation. This research does not illuminate *why* they were motivated to come to such a stance so much as it describes *how* they went about achieving and expressing that acceptance. Future research seeking to answer this "why" question would be valuable. One of the significant limitations of this study is its cross-sectional, retrospective design, which does not allow for a full exploration of factors contributing to the changes the parents experienced. A prospective study of parents' experiences as they unfold over time would help to elucidate the motivations behind the adaptations that they undergo. Such research would be difficult to arrange, however. Researchers could seek parents who had recently learned of a child's minority sexual orientation, but most such parents would be unlikely to agree to participate initially, when they are emotionally vulnerable.

As an alternative, researchers might focus on factors that prior studies have suggested could be important in parents' adaptational processes. One particularly fruitful line of inquiry might include assessment of family resiliency among parents facing this situation. As Walsh (1998) notes, "A family resilience approach aims to identify and fortify key interactional processes that enable families to withstand and rebound from disruptive life challenges" (p. 3). There are several elements of Walsh's conceptualization of resilient family functioning that appear in these parents' narratives. The family's belief system is one component of resilient functioning. This includes having a positive expectation for outcomes, employing intentional efforts to make meaning from difficult life events, and transcendence or spirituality. These elements were

all clearly evident among the families in this study. The family's organizational patterns, including flexibility in adjusting to challenges, a sense of cohesion, and social and economic resources were also seen among these participants. Family communication processes are also central to Walsh's view of family resiliency. These families demonstrated clear communication patterns, collaborative problem-solving, and, especially, open expression of emotions.

A number of additional factors could be important to assess in future research. These parents' descriptions of their relationships with their children were generally quite positive; future studies might be designed to explore the effect of social desirability factors on parents' descriptions of these relationships. The impact of gender-role conformity on parent-child relationships and parental adaptation might be of interest to researchers. Studies might also be designed to consider the length of time since disclosure as a specific variable in assessing parental adaptation.

Another significant limitation of the study was the bias toward including parents who were active in formal support organizations. These parents are likely to be different in significant ways from those who do not choose to join such groups, such as in educational level and a tendency toward extraversion. In this study, I looked specifically at parents who reported having made a positive adjustment, who are almost certainly over-represented in support groups. To counter these limitations, future studies could specifically seek parents who are not involved in such networks. Another interesting line of inquiry could consider whether those who use formal support move through the process of adaptation more quickly than those who do not.

The final element of the "new Big Five" integrative principles for personality psychology outlined by McAdams and Pals (2006) is the differential role of culture. The parents in this study were relatively similar to each other in terms of race, ethnicity, age, and religious affiliation. More research is needed to understand if the patterns that emerged from their experiences will hold true for parents from differing backgrounds. Issues such as parents' race or ethnicity, religious traditions, socioeconomic status, geographic location, and educational attainment might affect parental adjustment. Parents from some cultural traditions might conceptualize their experiences differently from those in this study, such as in not perceiving a developmental process at all. Multiple cultural influences would be especially important to assess.

Implications for Counseling

When counseling parents whose sons or daughters have come out to them as gay or lesbian, therapists should be aware of the multitude of responses that they might encounter within the broad framework suggested by this study. An assessment of the time elapsed since learning that their child is lesbian or gay as well as their current areas of concern might suggest appropriate issues for clinicians to address initially.

Empathy and a nonjudgmental attitude would be especially crucial with parents who are using more emotion-focused coping. Knowing that they are not alone in their struggles and that there are many sources of support may prove beneficial. Some would benefit from referral to a support group, where isolation can be decreased and feelings normalized; other parents might best address their feelings through reliance on current support networks. It could be particularly important to address some common initial fears, such as those related to what parents sometimes perceive to be "forbidden" topics

to discuss with their children: HIV, hate crimes, and basic relationship concerns. Helping parents to move beyond these issues could enhance their coping skills and strengthen their relationships with their daughters and sons. Many parents could benefit from a discussion of how their life experiences, particularly regarding relationships, might still be relevant in many ways to their children's lives.

Overall stress levels are often reported to be high initially, so general stress management techniques such as exercise, spiritual practices, and positive reframing might be beneficial. Maintaining a strong emotional connection with the son or daughter who has come out can also be vitally important at this time. The counselor might also recommend the use of creative outlets, such as artistic expression or journal writing.

In terms of cognitive and behavioral realms of focus, counselors can promote activities that help parents learn more about gay culture and interact with lesbians and gay men as well as with other parents who have become more accepting. Many parents cite the value of having a lesbian or gay mentor to help them gather both instrumental and procedural knowledge about the gay community. Spending time in various settings with gay men and lesbians can help to desensitize parents and normalize the experience of identifying as lesbian or gay. Even for those who earlier resisted a support group, this venue can be valuable to enhance understanding.

There are also many books, articles, pamphlets, Websites, and other fact-based information sources available to assist parents. Because family members and friends are sometimes not gay-affirmative, counseling can help parents anticipate and effectively address differing perspectives should they choose to begin sharing this information with others.

As parents are able to regulate their emotional responses and learn more about the gay community, many may struggle with their values and spiritual beliefs. Counselors can assist this process by using existential treatment approaches that facilitate an exploration of values. Particularly if the counselor is not familiar with the clients' faith traditions, additional sources of information and spiritual support might be beneficial. Parents might choose to seek out their own faith leader, or the counselor could facilitate a referral for spiritual counseling.

Several other factors could also affect the counseling experience, and should be taken into consideration. Parents' personality dynamics will play a role in selecting approaches that will be most effective with them. For those who are more cognitively-oriented, for example, informational resources are likely to be seen as more valuable. The parent with a tendency to use more social and emotional approaches would probably prefer avenues that highlight that style, such as support groups and interaction with a gay mentor. Cultural factors must also be considered. Counselors must understand the implications of having a sexual minority child for those from cultural groups different from their own. Reading, consulting mentors or others with expertise, and seeking information and clarification from clients themselves can all be beneficial practices.

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APPENDIX

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Preliminary information
- Researcher's background & interest
- Procedures
- Consent

Can you tell me a little about yourself?
- Ask about race/ethnicity (be prepared to offer: African American, Asian, Native American, Latino(a)/Chicano(a), Caucasian/White)
- Ask about religious affiliation

Explore self-definitions
- Explore cultural backgrounds
- Explore unique life circumstances

Can you tell me about your family life before you learned that your son is gay (your daughter is lesbian)?
- Explore parent's perception of overall perspective toward life (e.g., learned happiness)
- Explore sense of family coherence
- Explore communication processes

How did you find out that your daughter is lesbian or your son is gay?
- Explore prior suspicion/knowledge
- How did coming out happen?
- Explore the meaning of this event for the parent

What were your reactions at first? Explore

How have your feelings and attitudes changed since those first reactions?
- What have you experienced since your first reactions?
- Has your understanding of who you are as a person changed? If so, how?
- Has your understanding of what it means to be a family changed? If so, how?

What do you think contributed to the changes you've experienced?

Specific events? (Explore each in depth)
Gradual evolution? (How did that happen for you?)
Key people or experiences? (How did those play out?)
What role has your lesbian daughter or gay son played in the process?
What role have others important to you played in the process?

In what ways have your other family members changed since you learned this news?

How has the experience affected your relationships:

With other family members?
With people at work?
With people at your place of worship (if applicable)?
With others in your community?

Are there any other aspects of this experience that you'd like to share with me?

Anything else you think that other parents would like to know about the process of adjusting to having a lesbian daughter or gay son?