

2008

Exploring relational processes in families of gay youth

Gregory Scott Meek

William & Mary - School of Education

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd>



Part of the [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Social Psychology Commons](#), and the [Student Counseling and Personnel Services Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Meek, Gregory Scott, "Exploring relational processes in families of gay youth" (2008). *Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects*. William & Mary. Paper 1550154133.

<https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.25774/w4-pmvv-w377>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.

Exploring Relational Processes in Families of Gay Youth

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Education
The College of William & Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Gregory Scott Meek
College of William & Mary
July 2008

Exploring Relational Processes in Families of Gay Youth

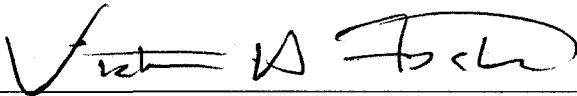
by

Gregory Scott Meek

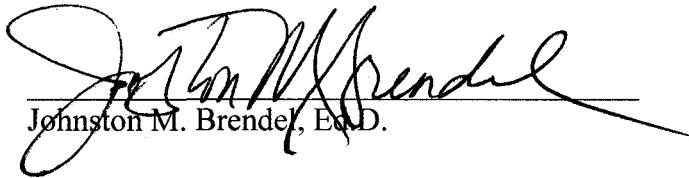
Approved July 2008 by



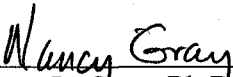
Charles F. Gressard, Ph.D.
Chairperson of Doctoral Committee



Victoria A. Foster, Ed.D.



Johnston M. Brendel, Ed.D.



Nancy L. Gray, Ph.D.

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my brother, Jeffrey Dale Meek, whose life and memory has inspired me to pursue my dreams with confidence and courage; qualities I learned from his life and am honored to carry on as his legacy in my own.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION	iii
PREFACE	viii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ix
ABSTRACT	xi
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	2
Gay Youth in the United States	2
Statement of the Problem	5
Current Knowledge of the Problem	6
Gaps in the Current Knowledge	9
Theory	10
Purpose of the Study	11
Methodology	11
Research Questions	12
Role of the Researcher	13
Limitations & Delimitations	14
CHAPTER TWO: A REVIEW OF SELECTED LITERATURE	15
Introduction	15
Frame of Discourse	16
Frame of Research	17
Youth Studies	17
Parent Studies	25
Family Studies	29
Summary	34
Frame of Theory	35
Queer Theory	35
Phenomenology	36
Family Development Theory	36
Integration	37
Chapter Summary	39
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY	40
Restating the Problem	40
Qualitative vs. Quantitative Approach	41
Suitability of Qualitative Approach to the Study	45
Paradigm	47
Interpretive Perspectives	48
Phenomenological Research Design	49
Philosophy	49
Phenomenological Method	50
Bracketing	51
Summary	52

Collective Case Study	53
Precedent in Research	53
Suitability for Family Research	54
Suitability to Qualitative Research	55
Site & Sample Selection	56
Participants	56
Setting	57
Sampling Procedure	57
Role of Researcher	58
Entry	58
Reciprocity	59
Data Collection	60
The Qualitative Interview	60
Family Interviews	60
Material Culture	61
Youth Interview	61
Reflexive Journal	62
Managing and Reporting Data	62
Ethical Considerations	62
Data Analysis	63
Verification	65
Reporting	67
Conclusion	67

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS & WITHIN CASE ANALYSES 68

Introduction	68
Overview of Analytical Procedure	69
Cicero's Family	70
Introduction	70
Themes	71
Growing Up Gay	71
Coming Out	75
Relationship Dynamics	77
Family & Community	81
Family Tree	85
Family Development Perspective	88
Queer Theory Critique	90
Summary & Reflections	93
Yasai's Family	93
Introduction	93
Themes	94
Constructions of Family	95
Relationship Dynamics	97
Marginalization	100
Positive Social Influences	103

Family Transitions	105
Partner & Family	107
Family Development Perspective	109
Queer Theory Critique	113
Summary & Reflections	115
Tatiana's Family	116
Introduction	116
Themes	117
Family Characteristics	117
Relationship Dynamics	120
Social Influences	127
Natural Progression	129
Coming Out	131
Family Development Perspective	134
Queer Theory Critique	137
Summary & Reflections	141
Alison's Family	141
Introduction	141
Themes	142
Family Dynamics	143
Relationship Dynamics	146
Sexuality	153
Addiction	154
Social Influences	156
Family Development Perspective	160
Queer Theory Critique	164
Summary & Reflections	166
Chapter Summary	167
CHAPTER FIVE: CROSS CASE ANALYSES	168
Introduction	168
Overview of Analytical Procedure	168
Themes	168
Cross Case Themes	169
Family Connections	169
Family Legacy	170
Closeness & Cohesion	174
Marginalization & Support	178
Internal Marginalization	179
External Marginalization	181
Supportive Family Relationships	184
Queering the System	189
Queered Relational Processes	190

Same-sex Partnerships	194
Queered Family Lifecycle	196
Family Resilience	199
Horizontal Stressors	199
Vertical Stressors	202
Relational Resilience	204
Chapter Summary	206
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS	208
Introduction	208
Return to the Research Problem	208
Purpose of the Study	209
Question 1	211
Comparison to Literature	215
Question 2	221
Comparison to Literature	224
Question 3	230
Comparison to Literature	234
Additional Findings	237
Comparison to Literature	239
Limitations of the Study	241
Future Directions of Inquiry	246
Implications for Counseling & Family Therapy	251
Implications for Counselor Education	255
Researcher Reflections & Conclusions	260
REFERENCES	262
APPENDICES	271
A: Request for Research Participants	272
B: Researcher as Instrument Statement	273
C: Sample Reflexive Journal Entry	276
D: Family Information Sheet	277
E: Interview Guide	279
F: Consent for Participation Form	282
VITA	283

PREFACE

“The experience of the other is always that of a replica of myself, of a response to myself. The solution must be sought in the direction of that strange filiation which makes the other forever my second, even when I refer him to myself and sacrifice myself to him. It is in the very depths of myself that this strange articulations with the other is fashioned. The mystery of the other is nothing but the mystery of myself. A second spectator on the world can be born from me.”

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, p. 135

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To simply acknowledge those individuals who supported and assisted me with this project seems somehow insufficient in lieu of their vital contributions to my success. The following words of recognition only scratch the surface of my gratitude and appreciation for the many people who have entered and impacted my life.

To Rick Gressard, who has been open to and supportive of my interests and endeavors over the past three years as I have carved out my unique place as a Counselor Educator. Thank you for your advice, availability, and encouragement.

To Victoria Foster, who has challenged and inspired me on my journey. You have been an amazing teacher and have taught me to see myself, my clients, and my world in new and more complex ways. The knowledge you have shared has transformed me.

To Johnston Brendel, who has mentored me both as a clinician and an educator. Your impact on my life has been invaluable. I appreciate all that you have done for me.

To Nancy Gray, who provided me with one of the most pivotal and salient experiences of my doctoral career. Thank you for introducing me to critical theory and expanding both my knowledge and my horizons.

As a committee you all have brought a breadth and depth to this project that has resulted in a dynamic and transformative experience for me and my participants. Thank you.

To Chris, who has not only provided me the hot meals and the many comforts of home, but has also endured the ups and downs of doctoral student life by my side. Your

presence in my life has sustained me. I thank you and I share this accomplishment with you.

To my cohort and my friends, who I thank not only for the undying support you've shown, but also for the good times, the fun, and the laughter. I am grateful to have shared this experience with each of you. You have made my experiences at William & Mary both memorable and treasured.

Most of all, I acknowledge my parents, Ray and Judy Meek. As I have engaged in and reflected on this project, I have come to understand the strong foundation you afforded me. You have supported me in everything I have done in my life, even at those times when you didn't quite understand. You have accepted me for who I am at all times. I love you both. You are great parents.

Exploring Relational Processes in Families of Gay Youth

ABSTRACT

Positing an interpretivist qualitative paradigm with a collective case study design this research explored the lived experiences of four families of gay youth. Youth participants ranged in age from 19-23 and had disclosed their sexual orientation to their families at least one year prior to their participation. Within case analyses of each family case were considered within three theoretical lenses derived from modernist and postmodern perspectives. Cross case analyses yielded four themes: Family Connections, Marginalization & Support, Queering the System, and Family Resilience. These themes were descriptive of the complex and recursive impact of relational processes within the four family systems. Conclusions included current limitations, directions for future research, and implications for both clinical counseling practice and counselor education and training.

GREGORY SCOTT MEEK

DEPARTMENT OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY AND COUNSELOR EDUCATION

THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM & MARY IN VIRGINIA

EXPLORING RELATIONAL PROCESSES IN FAMILIES OF GAY YOUTH

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Gay Youth in the United States

From the moment a young person recognizes that she or he may be lesbian, gay, or bisexual, so too comes the realization that she or he will have to hide that sexual orientation from friends, family, and others in the community to avoid victimization.”

(Rivers & D’Augelli, 2001)

The victimization of gay youth is a social problem in the United States that has been normalized within the dominant culture (Rivers & D’Augelli, 2001). This normalization not only serves to shore up the status of the heterosexual as the principal cultural icon, but also has significant implications for the psychosocial development of youth who fall outside of the sexual mainstream. For the purpose of this discussion, this marginalized group will be referred to as gay youth, using the term gay to identify not only men, but lesbians and bisexual youth as well. Rivers and D’Augelli (2001) put forward three primary areas of cultural victimization: being made to feel different, the experience of atypical family stressors, and the implications of the AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) epidemic.

The stress of being made to feel different is inherent in the social marginalization of gays and lesbians of all ages (Rivers & D’Augelli, 2001). Existing on the margins of dominant culture often results in the involvement of gay youth in social problems such as prostitution, drug use, and homelessness (Radkowsky and Siegel, 1997; National Gay & Lesbian Task Force, 2006). Speaking of this sense of being different, authors state that “this sense of 'otherness' results from isolation from those with similar feelings and from

messages that homoerotic feelings are shame worthy” (Rivers & D’Augelli, 2001, p. 200). Authors frame this experience of otherness and isolation as systemic, stating that “feeling different (and often not being able to understand the feeling), youths withdraw from others, or try to act 'straight' with varying degrees of success [which] widens the gap between private identity and public identity” (p. 200).

The AIDS epidemic of the 1980’s has left a legacy for contemporary gay youth which exacerbates their feelings of otherness and isolation, particularly for males (Rivers & D’Augelli, 2001). Glick-Schiller, Crystal, & Lewellen (1994) trace the social response of the epidemic and highlight the manner in which specific groups, namely gay men and intravenous drug users, came to be directly associated with the disease. Referring to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) classification system, the authors state that: “in the United States...anyone who was gay or who used intravenous drugs became identified as a member of a risk group, whether or not he or she engaged in behavior that transmitted HIV [Human Immunodeficiency Virus]” (p. 1338). Authoritatively linking sexual orientation rather than specific behaviors to HIV transmission sends a cultural message that has direct implications for youth who are coming to understand their sexuality. Rivers and D’Augelli (2001) suggest that this message serves as a definite impediment for the healthy development of gay youth, stating that “the burden of feeling that one’s sexual orientation puts one at risk for a potentially lethal infection...is but one form of special stress that HIV/AIDS has superimposed on LGB [lesbian, gay, bisexual] youth development – a directly experienced pervasive stress” (p. 201).

The third area of cultural victimization posited by Rivers and D'Augelli (2001) centers on the families of gay youth. While authors suggest that disclosing a non-heterosexual identity to parents and family can be a salient turning point in a young person's identity development (Savin-Williams, 1994), and that support from parents can help alleviate other forms of cultural and social stressors (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993), Rivers and D'Augelli (2001) cite a number of research studies that suggest that the family environment does not always provide the foundation needed for gay youth to thrive. The authors state that "the home is often not a safe haven for LGB youths if they tell their families about themselves or if their sexual orientation becomes known" (p. 206). Authors go on to cite the following data from existing research:

- 19%-41% of gay youth experience verbal abuse in the form of insults or threats (Herek & Berrill, 1992)
- 36% of gay youth encounter insults from at least 1 member of their immediate family (Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995)
- 22% of gay males and 14 % of gay females experience verbal abuse from family (Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995)
- 4%-7% of gay youth experience physical violence in the home (Herek & Berrill, 1992)
- 61% of all reported violence incited by youths' sexual orientations occurs in the family (Hunter, 1990)
- 18% of gay females and 8 % of gay males experience physical abuse from family (Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995)

- Fear of negative consequences from family members inhibits disclosure by gay youth (D'Augelli, Hershberger, Pilkington, 1998)

Statement of the Problem

The previous discussion of the cultural victimization of gay youth and the data supporting this phenomenon adequately frames the problem for the current research. In the most basic terms, gay youth in the U.S. are suffering. Much of this suffering is due to cultural factors that relegate these young people to the margins of the social field by sending messages that evoke shame, helplessness, and isolation. These messages also impact the family system by asserting prescriptive regimes regarding parenting practices and acceptable outcomes. Rivers and D'Augelli (2001) suggest that parents often blame themselves for their child's sexual orientation, and that families are often constrained by socialized belief systems (e.g. religious doctrine) which shape reactions to gay children. In the broad scheme, these social messages can recapitulate societal oppression within the family system (Green, 2002). On the other hand, theories of family development suggest that embeddedness in a family system serves and fosters the development of adolescents into adulthood. Stone-Fish and Harvey (2005) state that family relationships "are catalysts for children to develop. Embedded in relationships, children learn that they belong and are confirmed" (p. 17). The authors go on to state that "relationship dynamics...organize family members' perceptions of behavior. It is practically impossible for family members to see behavior devoid of relational content" (p. 18).

Taking these concepts in concert, one recognizes the tension between the social factors that shape the family system and the relational factors of that very system that

shape the lives of adolescents. For gay youth, the resolution of this tension may be the difference between thriving and suffering from cultural victimization. The dichotomous tension between the family and the larger society not only gives a greater degree of depth to the problem, but also suggests potential means to seek resolution. Within the relational content of families of gay youth may lay the negotiation of this tension. In turn, exploration of this content may lead to avenues for greater assistance in alleviating the suffering that lies at the problem's foundation.

Current Knowledge of the Problem

Research to date regarding families of gay youth has examined the problem by taking two primary approaches. The first of these approaches has been to examine the status of youth and their perspectives on family relationships. The second has explored the perspectives of parents. Many of the studies within both approaches have focused on the process of disclosure of sexual orientation or coming out on the part of the gay child. A third approach that has been taken in a more limited number of research studies has been to involve both parents and children or intact families. A cursory review of this literature will follow to provide a snapshot of current knowledge as well as frame the purpose and rationale for the current study.

Up until the mid to late 1990's research on families of gay youth centered on identifying and exploring the relationship between coming out and potential risk factors for youth. This research revealed that over 75% of gay youth disclose their sexual orientation to their parents, with the average age at the time of disclosure being 17 (D'Augelli, Hershberger, and Pilkington, 1998). In terms of reactions, the majority of mothers were described as accepting, while fathers were perceived as less so. While

fathers actually exhibited negative reactions more frequently, the actual or anticipated reactions of mothers proved to be the most significant factor in the experience of coming out or decision to disclose. Although some youth reported incidents of family violence as well as suicide attempts as a result of their disclosure, others indicated significantly higher levels of comfort with their sexuality despite potentially negative reactions from parents. With such a relatively high rate of disclosure despite perceived negative consequences, one can infer that coming out to parents is somehow important to this group of young people, and that the act of disclosure has a salient impact on personal satisfaction and sense of self.

Other research has examined familial factors that impacted coming out from the perspective of gay youth (Waldner & Magruder, 1999); Merghi & Grimes, 2000). The factors involved in this analysis for gay youth include their perceptions of family relations, perceived resources outside of the family system, and expression of identity. Studies have revealed that factors such as the perceived nature of relationships with parents as well as the overall relational climate of the family system were important influences on the decision to come out. Cultural factors such as the collective valuing of family, familial expectations, and the social perceptions of family were also found to be salient factors in the coming out process, particularly among non-European American participants (Merghi & Grimes, 2000).

More recently, research and writing regarding gay youth has begun to look at the impact of the data obtained from descriptive studies has had on the population of gay youth in the United States. Due to factors such as social marginalization and persistent institutionalized homophobia, the need for comprehensive social services for gay youth

has become apparent (Berger, 2005). Building on the descriptive data that has been obtained from previous research, advocates for gay youth have suggested that keeping families together is a primary goal of intervention (Jacobs & Freundlich, 2006). This goal is based on findings that despite the fact that these youth often suffer from different manifestations of homophobia with their own family systems, they frequently want to remain attached to their families of origin.

Writing regarding the parents of gay youth most frequently posit the child's disclosure of a non-heterosexual orientation not only as a traumatic event for the family but the initiation of a grief process for parents (Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998). This process is typically presented in terms of the stages of grief theorized by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross (1969) moving parents through initial stages of shock to a final stage of an acceptance of their child's sexual orientation. In much of the literature, the grief reaction is thought to be a normal and acceptable response to this type of disclosure which inevitably serves as a developmental milestone for the family system as a whole (MacDonald, 1983; Boxer, Cook, & Herdt, 1991). In addition to relating to the stages of grief, parent reactions indicated by the existing body of research also has tended to be characterized by health concerns (HIV/AIDS), concerns about the influence of others on their child's sexual orientation, and fears of alienation or estrangement from their child. In terms of support, researchers most often have cited psychoeducational groups and organizations as a venue for meeting the needs of these parents.

Beyond the examination of gay youth and their parents as separate entities, little research exists that explores these intact family systems. Those that have engaged children and their corresponding parental subsystems have followed the existing format

of interviewing children and parents separately (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). A single case study has explored an intact family with a gay child and used collective interviews with family members as a means of gather data (Baptist, 2002). Although limited, the research that has examined the intact family systems of gay youth has begun to uncover features that were not evident in the previous literature. In two qualitative studies, themes related to communication processes, emotional expressions, new visions of the future, and creating a new family narrative emerged (Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Baptist, 2002). This emergence of new and different data seems to have resulted through the consideration of parents and children collectively rather than in isolation and taking a systemic approach to understanding the phenomenon.

Gaps in Current Knowledge

Based on existing research, what is known is that gay youth in the United States suffer from social, familial, and personal consequences stemming from marginalization and homophobia. The importance of the family system for the support and well-being of these youth is also apparent. Unfortunately, existing research indicates that disclosure on the part of the youth most frequently results in various forms of dissonance and trauma within the family system. Various authors suggest modes of assistance ranging from efforts toward social change, to social services that address the risk factors associated with gay youth, to psychoeducational support for parents. These interventions address the broad context and the individuals, but leave the collective family system out of the equation. What characterizes the relationships within families of gay youth? What processes of communication exist? What exemplifies adaptive processes? What aspects of these relational processes facilitate resilience? These questions not only highlight the

gaps in the current literature, but also inform the purpose and course of the proposed study.

Theory

Two primary areas of theory inform the purpose and methodology of this study. Family development theory provides a framework in which family relationships can be described, while queer theory can be used to address and understand the experiences of gay youth and their families experience in a sociocultural context. Using these two frameworks in concert provides a comprehensive theoretical base for the proposed study.

The aforementioned guiding questions in this study are framed within theories of healthy family functioning and directly address concepts of cohesion, communication, and flexibility in the family system (Olson & Gorall, 2003). Family development theory posits that families that exhibit balance in these three areas tend to have functional and supportive relationships. In addition, this body of theory provides additional tools for family conceptualization in terms of the family lifecycle that provides critical information regarding the context of family functioning (Carter & McGoldrick, 2005). Context includes broad and specific characteristics, is shaped by transitions, and is fundamental to the construction of our lives individually and collectively. In order to gain the essence of lived experiences among participants in the current study, family development theory requires that context be an integral component of inquiry.

In the realm of critical critique, queer theory offers a framework through which dominant discourse on gender and sexuality can be troubled and social issues of gender and sexual privilege can be addressed. Plummer (2005) describes queer theory as having a de-centering effect. This suggests that the application of queer theory to the field of

culture attempts to push the dominant out of the center and allow sexual and gender minority groups on the margins to garner more central status, recognition, and visibility. In terms of gay youth, queer theory directly addresses the context and cycle of cultural victimization. For the families of these youth, queer theory offers a rubric for understanding the social concerns that have been reported in the existing body of research. Queering the view of the family serves to illuminate lived experiences of gender and sexuality rather than shadowing or closeting them.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the relational processes of families of gay youth. The goal of this investigation was to explore the processes, gain a sense of these families' experiences, and come to better understand the meaning families make of their relationships, particularly as they relate to having a child, sibling, grandchild, etc. who is gay. The goal was not to draw objective conclusions, but rather to accurately convey an understanding of the lived experience of family relationships.

Methodology

The methodology and design of the present study was tied directly to existing theory and research. Grounded in an interpretivist paradigm and examined through a phenomenological approach, this exploration of lived experiences of families of gay youth was a qualitative inquiry. Interpretivist phenomenology allowed the participant researcher to gain a rich sense of the essence of lived experiences from the unique perspectives of participant families. This essence of experience was derived by employing a collective case study strategy. With precedence in family research, this strategy will allow each family to be considered as a unique case (Davey, Askew, &

Godette, 2003; Doran, & Downing Hansen, 2006). The unique experiences of each case family emerged through a collective family interview as well as through direct observation and the sharing of material culture and artifacts.

Qualitative research methodology is concerned with trustworthiness, credibility, and rigor (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). In order to ensure these elements of best practices are met, the present research design incorporated triangulation of data, prolonged engagement of the researcher with the participants, member checking, and peer debriefing. In addition, reflexive journaling on the part of the researcher and a Researcher as Instrument Statement were posited. These elements were deliberate and intentional parts of the research design and carried out in a systematic manner.

Data was analyzed inductively so as to let themes emerge from individual cases. This process consisted of a continual process of data organization, review, and coding (Creswell, 2003). This recurrent and recursive process of analysis allowed not only for deeper understanding but for also for more accurate interpretation and reporting. In presenting the results, cross case analysis identified common themes across family participants as well as unique differences among the various family cases.

Research Questions

According to Stake (2003), case study research within the qualitative tradition is conceptualized around questions that address a particular issue or set of issues, described as “complex, situated, and problematic relationships” (p. 142). The author suggests since qualitative research is oriented toward understanding complexities, that research questions should not be solely constructed for informational purposes but instead should reflect “thematic lines” which relate to the issue at hand. The issues that comprise the

proposed study are three-fold. First, the relational aspects of these intact family systems have not been explored in existing research. In addition, risk factors among gay youth are related to family support (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). Therefore, research questions were designed to explore those ways in which supportive processes occur within these family systems. Finally, research has determined that social factors have an influence on family functioning (Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Baptist, 2002). Questions regarding this issue were designed to obtain information regarding how families of gay youth view themselves in the greater social context. Based on this discussion, the current research posed the following questions:

1. How do parents and gay youth make meaning of their experiences as a family?
2. How is emotional expression characterized in families of gay youth before and after coming out?
3. What social factors impact the process of family meaning making?

Role of Researcher

According to Creswell (2003) “qualitative research is interpretive research, with the inquirer typically involved in a sustained and intensive experience with participants” (p. 184). Rossman & Rallis (2003) add that in addition to being a participant, the qualitative researcher is also positioned as a learner. As a participant learner, the process of gathering data becomes both reflexive and relational (Suzuki, Ahluwalia, Arora, & Mattis, 2007). The qualitative researcher reflects on the personal connections and reactions to the subject matter throughout the research. In addition, data is obtained through relationships that are established with participants and the social environments in

which they reside. The relationships between the researcher and the participants form the interpretive grounds of phenomenological inquiry (Moustakas, 1994).

The interpretive nature of phenomenology is also evident in the collective case study strategy that will be used in this study. Stake (2003) summarizes the roles of the case study researcher as conceptualizing the case, composing the research questions, analyzing data for patterns, triangulating observations in the data, making primary and alternative interpretations, and arriving at conclusions and generalizations about the case.

Limitations & Delimitations

Case study research requires that object of inquiry be bounded by setting or context (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, the delimitation of the present study is inherent in its design. The goal of the study is to explore the lived experiences of six families. While families will be selected based on criteria outlined in previous research, participants' families will be obtained through accessible and convenient sources. This process of selection could potentially limit the scope of the information obtained and reported from this research. However, unlike quantitative research, qualitative inquiry does not strive for broad generalizability of results (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Instead, qualitative research seeks to convey heuristically rich results with carry with them multiple levels of interpretability. Interpretation is an intrinsic part of the process of communication of experience, the construction of meaning, the documentation of understanding, and the ultimate reporting of qualitative results. Given this interpretive strata, the generalizable nature of the results of the current study rely solely on the consumer of the research to determine the comparability of the bounds and delimitations of the current study with those of other contexts.

CHAPTER TWO

A REVIEW OF SELECTED LITERATURE

Introduction

Disclosure of a non-heterosexual orientation can be a difficult decision with a myriad of potential consequences (Connolly, 2006). For gay youth, the disclosure of sexual identity can result in not only social rejection but also rejection from family members, who otherwise could offer an important source of support (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). Radkowsky and Siegel (1997) cite studies that suggest that gay youth who are rejected by their parents are at risk for a variety of emotional, psychosocial, and health problems, including isolation, depression, suicide, prostitution, drug use, and sexually transmitted infections. Green (2002) suggests that for youth the decision to disclose or "come out" to parents and family of origin involves a careful assessment of not only the importance of family to the youth and existing aspects of family relationships, but also the youth's expectations of family members' reactions and the availability of emotional and social support that exists outside of the family. This suggestion of a prepared and evaluative approach to disclosure in lieu of the potential risks is based on existing literature that outlines various reactions and models of reactions that parents exhibit when they learn their child is gay or lesbian.

The following discussion will present a sample of this body of literature and trace the development of research and theory regarding the relationships between gay youth and their parents. Beginning with a discussion of the experiences and perceptions of gay youth, this chapter will also review the research that examines the perceptions of their parents, as well studies that explore family dynamics. Particular areas of theory that

frame this population of youth and their families will also be presented. In order to stage the discussion, the following section will provide a review of terminology and language that is used to characterize gay, lesbian, and bisexual adolescents.

Frame of Discourse

Gay youth or adolescents are typically framed between the ages of 14 and 21 in existing research, with youth between the ages of 15 to 20 being most frequently present in participant samples (Anhalt & Morris, 2003). For the purpose of the present discussion, the terms youth and adolescent will be used interchangeably and will refer to young men and women between these ages that have gained precedence in the literature. In order to characterize this group further, particularly to discern the label of “being gay,” aspects of that label must be considered.

Sexual orientation, which is considered to have its origins in biology, “is the preponderance of erotic feelings, thoughts, and fantasies one has for members of a particular sex, both sexes, or neither sex” (Savin-Williams, 2005, p. 28). For the purposes of the proposed study, the term gay youth describes young people between the ages of 14 and 21 who have persistent erotic cognitions for members of the same-sex. Although debate exists as to the actual physiological determinants of sexual orientation, its ties to human biology asserts that sexual orientation is not a choice.

Sexual behavior and sexual identity, unlike orientation, are framed more as a matter of individual choice and understanding (Savin-Williams, 2005). Sexual behavior is tied to action at the will and discretion of the individual. Behavior can exist independently of orientation. For the purposes of the proposed study, sexual behavior is not necessarily an issue. More important are the meanings participants make of the

attractions and desires that comprise orientation. The act of making meaning about orientation reflects a deeper understanding of oneself and one's place in the social world.

Savin-Williams (2005) states that "sexual identity is a socially recognized label that names sexual feeling, attraction, and behavior....Although the specific label chosen is a matter of personal taste, the options are limited by the pool of potential, socially constructed identities defined by the culture and time in which one lives" (p. 34).

Invoking the social nature of the discourse surrounding the population being explored by the current study is salient to the research. When considering the lived experiences of individuals and groups, the larger social context of those participants cannot be extricated from those experiences. Terms often used to describe gay youth and adults such as homosexual and sexual minority reflect a societal desire to categorize difference or otherness perhaps with the purpose of pathologizing or depathologizing, or perhaps excluding or including. Regardless of the purpose, the recognition that experiences of gay youth and their families exist within a social discourse of language and beliefs is vitally important to the research study being proposed.

Frame of Research

Youth Studies

A foundational and comprehensive research study which examined the perceptions and experiences of gay youth was conducted by D'Augelli, Hershberger, and Pilkington (1998). The researchers completed a quantitative study involving a sample of gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth obtained through support groups held in 14 U.S. cities. Research questions centered on the youths' perceptions of parental reactions and family experiences following the disclosure of a non-heterosexual orientation. Youth selected to

be surveyed as part of this study were under the age of 21 and lived at home with their parents. The survey instrument was constructed based on questions developed in previous research (D'Augelli, 1991) as well as established measures of mental health and self-esteem, the Brief Symptom Inventory (Derogatis & Spencer, 1982) and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory (Rosenberg, 1979) respectively. The assessment covered four primary categories: sexual orientation and behavior, social aspects of sexual orientation, disclosure within the family, and adjustment problems (including suicidal ideation).

Results of the study indicated that 76% of youth surveyed had disclosed their non-heterosexual orientation to their parents, with 17 being the mean age of disclosure (D'Augelli, Hershberger, and Pilkington, 1998). Those subjects that had disclosed or come out to their parents indicated significantly higher levels of overall comfort with their sexuality. Fifty-one percent of mothers were described as accepting, while only 27% of fathers were perceived as such. Siblings were reported as accepting by 57% of those respondents who had disclosed. While fathers actually exhibited negative reactions more frequently, the actual or anticipated reactions of mothers proved to be the most significant factor in the experience of coming out or decision to disclose. Verbal abuse as well as physical attacks from family members was reported by both male and female youth in the study. Suicide attempts were reported by 51% of subjects who had disclosed and 12% of those subjects had not revealed their sexual orientation to their parents or family. Discussing these results, the authors state that “this study demonstrates the extent to which disclosure to families—and family members' reactions to it—are critical factors in the adjustment of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth. Such disclosure is a central

dilemma both for young people who have already told their families and for those who remain reluctant to do so” (p. 367).

While D’Augelli, Hershberger, and Pilkington (1998) provided extensive demographic data regarding the perceptions of gay youth about their families, Waldner and Magruder (1999) posited a theoretical model of the coming out process for youth that is based on a cost-benefit analysis. The factors involved in this analysis for gay youth include their perceptions of family relations, perceived resources outside of the family system, and expression of identity. These factors are described as recursive, and hypothesizing their interaction, the authors state that “gay youth who perceive supportive resources, who are already expressing their identity, and who report weaker family relations are more ‘out’ to their parents” (p. 86). The authors based these ideas on social factors, suggesting that the family would most likely act as a conduit for social discourse regarding homosexuality, which is traditionally comprised of negative messages. Therefore, positive family relations would lead to more investment in these negative messages and result in youth not only being less likely to disclose a non-heterosexual orientation, but also less likely to express their identity as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, and seek out sources of support for their identity development.

Waldner and Magruder (1999) tested their model with a sample of 172 gay adolescents using a snowball sampling procedure initiated with youth involved in a clinical support group. The sample was almost evenly divided between male and female subjects with a mean age of 17. Subjects’ families were described as suburban, dual wage earning, upper-middle class families. Survey items were developed by researchers and assessed both perceptions and behaviors on Likert-type scales. No reliability or validity data was reported regarding the survey measure. Results indicated support for

the proposed model, with significant and moderately strong correlations between youth's perceptions of family relations, identity expression, and sources of support. Positive family relations tended to be indicative of less identity expression and fewer perceptions of supportive resources. Youth who reported positive relationships with their families tended to see less need for external support and tended not to express their sexual identity based on the perceived costs of doing so. Researchers also identified a significant and important indirect effect of family relations, stating that "less positive family relations decrease identity disclosure through the relationship with both identity expression and gay-supportive resources perceived by the adolescent. Family relations, then, dilute the direct positive effects of these variables and should be considered in future models" (p. 96).

Merghi and Grimes (2000) also posited the importance of the family system on the coming out process for gay youth, stating that "the process of coming out in families may be shaped not only by the parent-child relationship, but also by the conservative or liberal nature of the family system" (p. 33). As in the discussion of Waldner and Magruder (1999), this statement suggests that it is not only dynamics within the family that have an impact on the coming out process, but also the potential manner in which culturally based values might be reflected in those dynamics. Merghi and Grimes (2000) explore these values in a qualitative study of the coming out experiences of 57 gay men from four distinct cultural backgrounds (African-American, Mexican-American, Vietnamese-American, and European-American). Participants ranging in age from 18-24 were obtained through chain and purposive techniques which included referrals through community leaders as well as flyers and advertisements in publications targeted toward the population being studied. Individual narratives from participants were obtained through interviews from which themes were derived.

In terms of these themes, Merghi and Grimes (2000) identified four overarching categories that emerged from the data: (a) acts of disclosure, (b) influence of culture on disclosure, (c) initial family responses to disclosure, and (d) turning points in families. Among their participants, the researchers found that disclosure was sometimes made in a direct and prepared fashion, while some participants felt that they disclosed indirectly. Indirect disclosure was characterized by an approach to family in which the individual participant did not hide aspects of his gay identity but also did not directly and verbally disclose his sexual orientation. One participant in the study described his experience, stating that "I've never officially said 'Mom, Dad, I'm gay and you're just gonna have to deal with it.' It's like they know and we discuss things about it..." (p. 36). The cultural influences on emergent disclosure patterns centered on the value of the family system, particularly among non-European participants. While the importance of family and the unconditional nature of family relationships often served as a facilitative condition, concerns about how the family would be perceived in the community and by extended family members (sometimes in countries of origin) were expressed as negative influences. Familial expectations, such as carrying on the family name, were also characterized as culturally influenced concerns and often had to be discussed and negotiated as part of the coming out process. Family responses ranged from active to passive. In one instance a European-American participant described his mother as engaging in social acts of advocacy and support on his behalf, while other participants described reactions that were characterized by denial and disengagement. Some family members offered acceptance in order to preserve the family system, which again was reflective of a culturally based value for family. Researchers also discerned turning points for families from the data. Community resources targeted toward parents of gay youth were mentioned as a facilitating acceptance. A final aspect of family turning points derived from

the data regarded the new understanding among parents of not only their child and their family, but also themselves as a parents.

The research that has contributed to this knowledge of gay youth has been primarily quantitative in nature, using psychometric measurement and techniques to reduce and synthesize information. D'Augelli, Hershberger, and Pilkington (1998) framed the experiences of gay youth with measurements of lifestyle elements, mental health symptoms, and self-esteem. Waldner and Magruder (1999) developed an instrument to measure perceptions and behaviors of gay youth with no reports of validity or reliability. These assessment procedures raise concerns in several areas. First, if not developed specifically for the population being studied, the instruments may not capture the nuances of the experiences of gay youth or may be heterosexist in nature. Second, the areas of assessment (self-esteem, behavior, and mental health) might not be relevant, thus threatening the validity of any assumptions made by asserting their relevance. Finally, the instruments may not be measuring what they are purported to measure given the marginal social position of this population. These methodological concerns give increased credence to qualitative approaches, such as those carried out by Merghi & Grimes (2000), which provided more rich and expansive description of the lives and experiences of the research participants.

In recent years, research and writing regarding gay youth has begun to look at the impact of the findings obtained from descriptive studies regarding the effects risk factors and family experiences have had on this population. Berger (2005) posits that social and institutional homophobia and the typical crisis points in the lives of gay youth, including the potential negative consequences of coming out, have resulted in a population in need of support and special services. According to Berger,

while being gay is the common denominator of this group of youths, their sexual orientation intersects a number of other factors—race, ethnicity, class, access to resources, and prior system involvement—in determining whether GLBT youths find themselves in a safe and loving home or on the street. Young people who end up living on the streets have typically experienced homophobia in multiple environments. Having grown up in a family and community that rejected them and destroyed their self-esteem, they're often made to endure homophobia from adults who are meant to provide care. (p. 24)

Berger also states that “young people who have support from even one adult, whether a teacher, a mentor, or a relative, show significantly greater levels of coping ability and resilience than those who do not” (p. 24).

Jacobs and Freundlich (2006) discuss these same ideas in the context of permanence for gay youth. Also writing about ways in which gay youth can be better served by the social service system in the United States, the authors state that youth in general frequently desire to remain attached to their families of origin despite the events and reasons that may have precipitated their exit or removal from that family system. In addition, authors cite Sanchez (2004) stating that “youth themselves most often view their permanency needs as primarily relational, then physical, and finally and only in some cases, legal” (p. 211). Based on these statements, Jacobs and Freundlich put forward the reuniting of youth with their families of origin as a primary strategy for meeting their needs stating that “with clinical intervention, education, counseling, and support, many families are able to begin to accept their child's sexual orientation or

gender identity and, with continuing support and assistance to the family and youth, the youth can safely return home” (p. 312).

Savin-Williams (2005) has shifted the focus on gay youth by conceptualizing them not as consistently troubled and victimized but rather as social pioneers and agents of change. Writing on contemporary gay teens, Savin-Williams states that “in this new century, same-sex-attracted teenagers are leading lives that are nearly incomprehensible to earlier generations of gay youth. To understand what it is like to be young with same-sex attractions now often means discarding our previous ideas about what it means to be gay” (p. 14). Like many of the authors reviewed here (D’Augelli, Hershberger, and Pilkington, 1998; Waldner and Magruder, 1999; Berger, 2005; & Jacobs and Freundlich, 2006), much of the research and writing about gay youth has focused on crises and negative outcomes of their experiences. Savin-Williams (2005) reinforces the idea that these issues do not lie within the realm of identity or in the act of identifying, but rather in the social context in which the youth live. “Identifying as gay or lesbian during adolescence might be a troubled teenager’s attempt to address bad circumstances. Doing so allows him or her to find support, find a distinctiveness, find a community” (p. 181). These statements suggest an alternative viewpoint which Savin-Williams characterized as resilience. “Describing these young people as resilient acknowledges the developmental assets they’ve accumulated over their life course...” (p. 183).

The literature reviewed here not only provides a basis for what is known about gay youth, but also provides an indication of how that knowledge has developed and advanced over time. While gay youth often struggle, particularly with family-based issues, they are also challenging social and cultural norms related to gender and sexuality.

Many authors have described negative factors such as rejection, isolation, violence, and disengagement that can be tied to the family system of origin for this population of young people (Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997, & D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998).

Others have also suggested that despite this potential negativity, the family can offer a sense of hope and support for the adjustment, development, and resilience of gay youth (Merghi & Grimes, 2000, Savin-Williams, 2005; Berger, 2005, Jacobs and Freundlich, 2006). Regardless of how these issues are framed, the impact of the family system on the experiences of gay youth cannot be denied.

Parent Studies

Savin-Williams and Dube (1998) characterize the experience of a child disclosing a non-heterosexual orientation to parents as traumatic. This trauma extends not only to the parent-child relationship, but to the family system as a whole. In reference to this type of disclosure, MacDonald (1983) states that “healthy family relationships under such circumstances are ‘uncommon’ and that trauma must necessarily beset families with a sexual minority youth” (Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998, p. 7). Boxer, Cook, and Herdt (1991) suggest that the disclosure of a child initiates a “coming out” process for parents as well, during which milestones in the family lifecycle such as a child’s marriage and having grandchildren must be reevaluated and meanings reorganized. “Once confronted with the reality of their child’s sexual orientation, parents have been described by mental health professionals as reacting with symptoms of grief and mourning...” (Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998, p. 7). The following review will explore the research on parents and families of gay youth and provide a critique and discussion of critical gaps in current knowledge.

A relatively early study in this area conducted by Robinson, Walters, and Skeen (1989) examined the reactions of parents to the discovery that their child was gay and related concerns over AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome). Researchers surveyed 402 parents from across the United States, who participated in support groups for parents of gay children. The survey instrument was developed by researchers with input from heterosexual parents as well as gays and lesbians. Results indicated that the majority of parents completing the survey believed that their child was born with their particular sexual orientation. A smaller number of subjects (10%) believed that their child was gay due to external factors, e.g. someone influenced their sexual orientation. Based on the survey results, authors posited a stage model of parent reaction based on the model of grieving developed by Kubler-Ross (1969), which moved parents through initial stages of shock, to emotional reactions such as anger and depression, and finally to acceptance of their child's orientation. Concerns over AIDS were also documented and varied based on age and worldview of parents. Older parents tended to be more positive about the AIDS issue as did parents with a more liberal outlook.

Although the Robinson, Walters, and Skeen (1989) study is not without limitations, it is foundational to the exploration of the parent relationship with their gay child. The authors state that their research is limited due to several sampling issues. By obtaining subjects from parent support groups, they may have gained access to parents who were more informed, aware, and willing to accept the sexual orientations of their children. Such individuals may not be representative of the typical parent with a gay son or lesbian daughter. The authors described their participants as having a high level of acceptance and education. In addition, mothers made up over half of the sample (75%)

resulting in an underrepresentation of the perception of fathers. The children of the parents surveyed were also largely male. These sample characteristics are limiting in terms of diversity as it related to issues of race, class, and gender. Many of these same limitations persist throughout the body of research regarding relationships between gay children and their parents. However this study provides the beginnings of a roadmap for exploring the families of gay youth by suggesting that particular relational patterns exist that are unique to them.

Ben Ari (1995) built on the findings of Robinson, Walters, and Skeen (1989), incorporating aspects of qualitative inquiry with both parents and children. In order to explore and compare perceptions of coming out, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with two samples, one consisting of gay and lesbian young adults (n=32) and the second consisting of parents (n=27). Subjects were recruited through a “snowball sampling” referral method, with the majority of parents being obtained from support groups for parents with gay children. In addition to interviews designed to elicit descriptions of the coming out experiences of both parents and young adults, subjects also completed a demographic questionnaire and a researcher-developed Parental Reaction Scale (PRS). The PRS evaluated reactions (of parents) or perceptions of reactions (among young adults) over four specific time periods. The time periods specified on the PRS included: (a) the time of the initial disclosure, (b) one month following the disclosure, (c) six months following the disclosure, and (d) the time of the interview. Reactions were also specified on the instrument across 8 categories: shock, denial, shame, guilt, anger, rejection, acknowledgement, and acceptance. These categories were based on the Kubler-Ross model of grief that had also been applied in previous research (Robinson, Walters, & Skeen, 1989). Results from both qualitative interviews

and the quantitative survey indicated a benefit from parent education regarding homosexuality prior to learning of their child's sexual orientation. Attitudes around homosexuality prior to disclosure were found to have an important impact on not only parent adjustment (e.g. the movement toward acceptance) but also on family dynamics (e.g. increased honesty) after disclosure.

Through this study, Ben Ari (1995) provided a precedent for the use of theory for the study of gay youth and their families. The author created a theoretical foundation for the study through the use of research literature related to disclosure and sexual identity development. The precedent set by researchers and theorists in the area of sexual identity development has generally framed the coming out process as a progression of disclosure defined by developmental stage models. Within these models coming out to parents and family represents a significant milestone (Cass, 1979, Coleman, 1982, Troiden, 1989). In this study the author shifted the focus from the impact of disclosure on the individual to the impact of coming out on the family system. The results of the study revealed that factors such as prior knowledge of homosexuality on the part of parents tended to improve the parent-child dynamics after the disclosure was made.

Savin-Williams and Dube (1998) reviewed research that explored parental reactions to their child's disclosure of a non-heterosexual orientation and concluded that several areas of research were lacking. After considering the somewhat limited body of research, the authors concluded that "although these empirical findings are important in understanding parent-child relationships, they do not directly address the process that parents experience in accepting their gay child" (p. 10). This statement suggests that the focus of research shift beyond simply identifying perceptions toward exploring the

factors that influence and comprise families' dynamics as suggested by Ben-Ari (1995). The current discussion will consider this shift and the advancement of research toward the recommendations that Savin-Williams and Dube proposed.

Family Studies

Beeler and DiProva (1999) analyzed how families integrate a gay child into the family system after the parents move into a place of acceptance. Taking a narrative approach, the researchers interviewed four families, described as white and middle class. Sixteen emergent interviews were conducted with each family member individually regarding their accounts of the coming out experience from the time of disclosure to the time of the interview. Participants were obtained through parent support groups and one volunteer family that was acquainted with the researchers. The gay family members were males in three of the families and the time of disclosure ranged from one to ten years. Analysis of interview data yielded 12 themes. Themes centered on topics such as rules and communication (what topics related to sexuality could be discussed), emotional reactions (dealing with negative feelings), information seeking (through parent support groups), external constituents (social stigma), integration and normalization (increased acceptance of child and developing a new coherent narrative), and family lifecycle issues (alternative visions of the future). On the basis of their findings, authors disputed the prevalence of the grief model posited by Robinson, Walters, and Skeen (1989), suggesting that the model represents only one aspect of the total family experience. In addition, the authors discussed the limitations of linear models of adjustment which posit stage related, cumulative developmental steps. They concluded that the experiences of families are more complex than can be accounted for in a linear stage progression.

The study by Beeler and DiProva (1999) makes an important step toward understanding relational processes in the families of gay youth by exploring these aspects with parents and youth from the same family systems. Methodologically, the researchers described their study as an “exploratory interview project” and did not include a discussion of paradigm or other qualitative features other than the narrative strategy. No qualitative paradigm was described and the authors pointed out that the results are not generalizable, stating that “this paper should not be construed as a characterization of how families, generally, respond to disclosure” (p. 456). However, the authors went on to state that “we believe the approach taken in this project could be fruitfully applied to the study of families that are less accepting. This and the study of families responding in particular cultural contexts constitute two important goals for future work” (p. 457). Taking the approach of these researchers with a more deliberate and systematic application of theory and qualitative methodology could potentially enrich and deepen the information discovered.

Baptist (2002) employed such a systematic method of qualitative inquiry in the form of a case study of a 22 year old young adult male and his family of choice. The five members included in the subject’s family of choice were members of his family of origin as well as a teacher and friend, bringing the total number of participants in the study to six. Guided by family systems theory and social constructionism, the goal of the case study was to uncover narrative accounts of lived experiences surrounding the subject’s disclosure of a non-heterosexual orientation. In order to achieve this goal, the researcher conducted multiple face-to-face interviews with individual family members as well as one large group interview with 5 of the 6 participants. In addition, observational data

was collected and artifact data (family photos, videotapes, keepsakes) was examined. Qualitative analysis of the data revealed five distinct themes which related to the identity development of the individual, the impact of the level of identity development on the family, the integration of the individual into the family, the development of social supports, and an orientation toward social concerns. These themes trace a parallel progression for the gay individual and the family of that individual. Just as the individual came into a sense of self as a gay person, the family also found a new collective sense. This suggests that having a gay child in a family has an impact on how the family is conceptualized and constructed by its members. The family dynamics and relationships are reshaped after a child discloses his or her sexuality.

This study moved research with families of gay youth onto a new plane by taking a more deliberate and systematic approach than that seen in Beeler and DiProva (1999). Using a more extensive level of prolonged engagement and more comprehensive and descriptive narratives than Beeler and DiProva, Baptist (2002) added increased credibility to their thematic findings. The study traced the case family's journey toward not only accepting their son as a gay man, but also accepting themselves as a gay family. Most importantly the research highlights the importance of reflective process and how the interaction of family members can help families create new stories (in a narrative tradition) as well as expand and restructure the family system and deepen familial bonds. Baptist also draws attention to the importance of social factors and social perceptions in the lives of families. The findings suggest that coming out for the individual runs a parallel process with coming out for the family, both involving social marginalization.

The process of becoming a gay family in society then becomes a central outcome to the relational dynamics that exist in families of out gay youth.

In a more recent qualitative study, Saltzburg (2004) employed family systems theory, specifically the family lifecycle, and explored parent experiences as they related to raising a gay adolescent. The researcher conducted this phenomenological study through a lens derived from social work training and practice that included the concept of meaning making within a systemic framework. Seven parent participants were recruited from community groups located in New England that provided support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender adolescents as well as adolescents who were questioning their sexual orientation. As in previous studies, participants were white and middle class. The children of the parents were not interviewed as part of the study but demographic information about them was provided. They included 3 females and 4 males ranging in age from 15 to 18 years. Interviews with parents revealed four themes. First, parents in the study reported being aware of a difference about their child from early ages and characterized this difference in the realm of gender-related behavior. Second, parents revealed that being told of their child's sexual orientation was a salient event even in cases where they previously suspected their child might be gay or lesbian. Third, parents described emotional detachment from their child and a fear of estrangement as they attempted to make meaning out of their child's disclosure. Finally, they reported that adjustment and education, often through contact or mentoring from a gay adult was helpful. Based on these findings, the researchers proposed interventions and modes of practice that would support parents of gay youth and the parent-child relationship.

Saltzburg's study produced findings based on systematic empirical inquiry with implications for counseling practice. The phenomenological approach allowed for the lived experiences of the participants to be conveyed, explored, and understood with depth. Findings revealed important aspects of the parenting experience such as the recognition of gender related behaviors as early clues to difference and the salience of disclosure even when parents were aware of a difference in their child. A particular limitation of this study is found in the relationship between theory and methodology. While family systems theory was posited as a grounding theory, the adolescent was not included as part of the inquiry. This omission neglects an important component of the system, the adolescent. Bringing youth into the realm of inquiry with these parents would have enriched the findings and provided greater insight into the systemic and process domains of the themes that were derived from the data.

The research regarding parents and families illustrates a progression of inquiry into different aspects of the family experiences of gay youth over a period of several years. Research has moved from the mere examination of parent and youth perceptions toward investigation of the processes that underlie those perceptions. In terms of general limitations in this research, these studies are plagued by sampling and demographic issues. All of the studies reviewed drew subjects and participants from parent support groups, bringing into question their representativeness to the "typical" family with a gay child in the general population. In some instances the representation of parents was skewed. For example, Robinson, Walters, and Skeen (1989) and Ben Ari (1995) reported an overrepresentation of mothers in their samples. Finally, the lack of sociocultural

diversity may have been an issue, with the vast majority of research participants being Caucasian, middle class, and educated.

In terms of methodology, a systematic empirical qualitative examination of intact families has not been successfully achieved beyond a single case study design. Beeler and DiProva (1999) indicated that their research was an exploratory interview project and did not outline any specific qualitative protocol in their report beyond characterizing their study as narrative. While Saltzburg intentionally outlined a phenomenological approach, the researcher did not explore the intact family system. Although the findings of Baptist (2002) were provocative, the single case study approach limited the usefulness of the results. Questions arise related to the typicality of the family under study and the degree to which the processes uncovered through inquiry with the single family were congruent with the experience of other families.

Summary

While research with gay youth and their families has explored demographics of the population and the perceptions of both youth and parents, it has not adequately addressed the relational processes that comprise the experiences of these families. D'Augelli (2006) points out this gap by calling for research that investigates communication patterns, lifecycle issues, the relationship between negative attitudes and behavior, the impact of stressors, and coping styles within families of gay youth. Based on the existing research reviewed here and these recommendations, the current study proposes to build on the foundational work of Beeler & DiProva (1999) and Baptist (2002) and explore relational experiences across multiple families and multiple social contexts. This research will be carried out in a systematic fashion that is supported by

descriptive knowledge claims, a paradigmatic foundation, an articulated perspective, and a sound research strategy.

Frame of Theory

Two primary areas of theory are salient to the problem at hand. Family development theory provides a framework in which family relationships can be described, while queer theory can be used to address and understand the experiences of gay youth and their families experience in a sociocultural context. In addition, phenomenology provides a useful philosophical perspective in which the lived experiences of families can be considered. Using these three frameworks in concert provides a comprehensive theoretical and philosophical foundation for reflecting on the stated problem.

Queer Theory

In the realm of critical critique, queer theory offers a framework through which dominant discourse on gender and sexuality can be troubled and social issues of gender and sexual privilege can be addressed. Plummer (2005) describes queer theory as having a de-centering effect. This suggests that the application of queer theory to the field of culture attempts to push the dominant out of the center and allow sexual and gender minority groups on the margins to garner more central status, recognition, and visibility. “Queer theory disputes the essentialist view of sexuality and gender, and it rejects the notion that queerness is pathological. Instead, it posits that sexualities are constructed within social contexts” (Stone-Fish & Harvey, 2006, p. 30) In terms of gay youth, queer theory directly addresses the context and cycle of cultural victimization. For the families

of these youth, queer theory offers a rubric for understanding the social concerns that have been reported in the existing body of research.

Phenomenology

Gaining this essence of lived experiences requires a phenomenological perspective. Phenomenology is a branch of philosophy that rejects scientific realism and asserts that meaning in everyday life can only be found by looking beneath the surface of “mere appearance” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 191). Ahmed (2006) describes the phenomenological view as attending to the “background” of lived experiences (p. 38). According to Ahmed “family background... would refer not just to the past of an individual but also to other kinds of histories, which shape an individual’s arrival into the world, and through which “the family” itself becomes a social given” (p. 38). Thus, this view beneath the surface is an exploration of not just one context but multiple contexts of experiences. The individual is merely a case within a family context, which in turn becomes a case within the social realm.

Family Development Theory

The aforementioned guiding questions related to the stated problem are framed within theories of healthy family relational functioning. Healthy relational functioning is defined by a variety of frameworks within the field of family therapy. One such framework posits a multi-systems approach and delineates relational functioning into three core areas: problem solving, organization, and emotional climate (Yingling, Miller, McDonald, & Galewaler, 1998). Within this integrative framework, problem solving refers to the manner and means in which families work toward solutions to systemic issues that arise. These manner and means may be rooted in communication patterns,

negotiation skills, and adaptive processes. Organization refers to structural elements of the family system, which includes family roles and the presence of subsystems that are situated in particular hierarchical arrangements and demarcated by relational boundaries. Emotional climate refers to the ways in which feelings are expressed and nurturance is conveyed within the system. Patterns of attachment and conveyance of concern and care all make up the emotional climate of a family. Family development theory posits that families that exhibit balance in these three areas tend to have functional and supportive relationships. Along with family belief systems and ways of making meaning, these areas of relational processes are key components of a family resilience framework (Walsh, 2003). In addition, this body of theory provides additional tools for family conceptualization in terms of the family lifecycle, which provides critical information regarding the context of family functioning (Carter & McGoldrick, 2005). Context includes broad and specific characteristics, is shaped by transitions, and is fundamental to the construction of our lives individually and collectively. In order to gain the essence of lived experiences among participants in the current study, family development theory requires that context be an integral component of inquiry.

Integration

Family development theory and the practice of family counseling are inherently humanistic. According to Johnson and Boisvert (2002) “a humanistic approach to therapeutic change naturally lends itself to working with couples and families.

Humanistic practices exemplify the notion that people are formed and transformed by their relationships with others” (p. 309). Phenomenology studies “everyday experience from the point of view of the subject, and it shuns critical evaluation of forms of social

life (Schwandt, 2001, p. 192). Smith (2002) states that “queer articulates a radical questioning of social and cultural norms, notions of gender, reproductive sexuality, and the family” (p. 28). Based on these statements, in order to posit a unified theoretical and philosophical framework in which to conceptualize the problem, the radical nature of queer thinking must be reconciled with the notions of social harmony associated with humanism and the phenomenological rejection of social critique. How can the use of a developmental framework to describe the recursive impacts of the lived experiences of families and individuals be resolved with a perspective that troubles that very framework as perpetuating the dominant discourse?

Butler (1997) posits the notion of theoretical “incorporation without domestication” (p.25). This idea seems to have merit in finding a way in which these theoretical stances can work together, by suggesting that the each theory has something to offer to the ultimate goal of inquiry. This mutual offering among the three frameworks discussed is the consistent and pervasive consideration of context. Queer theory offers a manner and method to incorporate the social marginalization of gay youth and their families into the view of the stated problem. Phenomenology brings this social phenomenon into the realm of lived experience, adding depth of meaning to the background of the familiar. Family development theory provides a venue through which lived experiences can be explored and a point for theory to enter into the realm of practice. Writing in the vein of family counseling practice, Stone-Fish and Harvey (2006) state that:

Nurturing queer youth in family therapy requires a model of practice that respects the relational process of development and youths’ understanding of their own

identity. Shifting this understanding away from simple definitions of youth's sexuality to complex views of differing identities takes a model of practice informed by compassion, new theory, research, clinical experience, and a real openness toward learning. Nurturing this more complex view of sexuality is fostered by the incorporation of queer theory into extant family therapy practice.

(p. 28)

In this statement, the authors illustrate how integrating a phenomenological approach with queer theory and theories of family development can bring a new understanding to work with these youth and their families. Suggesting an appreciation for complexity of lived experiences, Stone-Fish and Harvey lay the groundwork for considering a new approach to the addressing and exploring issues facing gay youth.

Chapter Summary

Knowledge of gay youth and their families is framed by common social discourse as well as a body of scholarly research, writing, and theory. While limitations and tensions are inherent in these existing frameworks, the manner in which they inform a new approach to the stated research problem can not be ignored nor discarded. The aspects of nomenclature, research, and theory discussed in this chapter will not only inform but guide the development of a methodology to engage in an exploration of relational processes among gay youth and their families.

CHAPTER THREE
RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

Restating the Problem

Gay youth in the United States face myriad risk factors including increased isolation, depression, suicide, prostitution, drug abuse, and sexually transmitted diseases (Radkowsky and Siegel, 1997). Youth who are rejected by their parents because of their sexual orientation are at particular risk for these of emotional, psychosocial, and health problems. D'Augelli & Hershberger (1993) assert that family support can be crucial as these youth also navigate different forms and consequences of social rejection. Despite the apparent importance of family support, little research has actually examined those interactions within the families of gay youth that constitute supportive relationships (Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998). This gap in the research reveals a crucial deficit. This study aimed to address this gap by examining relational processes within the families of gay youth.

Creswell (2003) proposes three elements of inquiry: knowledge claims, strategies, and methods. These elements form not only the questions but also the approaches that comprise the design and process of research. Inherent in the elements are the quintessential decisions that guide the research agenda. This chapter outlines those decisions within the context of the current study and provides a justification and outline of how the research problem can be best addressed through the application of a specific research design and methodology.

Qualitative vs. Quantitative Approach

“Stating a knowledge claim means that researchers start a project with certain assumptions about how they will learn and what they will learn during their inquiry” (Creswell, 2003, p. 6). According to Creswell (1994), these knowledge claims are based on assumptions about the nature of reality (ontology), the nature of knowledge (epistemology), and the nature of discovery (methodology). In addition, assumptions about the use of language (rhetoric) and the role of values (axiology) also contribute to the manner in which knowledge will be claimed through the process of inquiry.

The ontological assumption in the current study provides a framework for understanding how the reality of the research problem is understood. In a quantitative research tradition, knowledge is objective and evidentiary claims are derived through objective analysis of data (Cresswell, 2003). This stance reduces aspects of knowledge into component parts that are operational, measurable, and subject to objective evaluation and analysis. In contrast, the approach to inquiry within the qualitative tradition strives to achieve a holistic and expansive account of an experience, event, or phenomenon (Glesne, 2006). Glesne states that, “realities must be seen as wholes rather than discrete variables that are analyzed separately” (p. 7). In addition, qualitative research assumes that realities are constructed by the individual, making the nature of reality highly contextual and influenced by socialization (Cresswell, 2003). “Meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting, [and] the basic generation of meaning is always social arising in and out of interaction with a human community” (p. 9). Therefore, to claim knowledge of reality in qualitative research

requires the researcher to understand not only the lived experiences of individuals, but also the meanings derived from those experiences.

Epistemology is a “branch of philosophy that studies the nature of knowledge and the process by which knowledge is acquired and validated (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003, p. 624). As it relates to research in the social sciences, this concept refers to the relationship between the researcher and the focus of inquiry. Schwandt (2001) describes “both rationalist and empiricist epistemologies [as] foundationalist; that is, they seek permanent, indisputable criteria for knowledge” (p. 71). The idea of indisputable criteria is apparent in quantitative approaches to research questions which assume “an autonomous, detached subject (knower) and a preoccupation with establishing correspondence between idea and object, concept and observation” (p. 71). In postpositivist research, the researcher remains objective and removed, and seeks knowledge based on logical and deductive reasoning. Epistemology in qualitative research differs in that the researcher becomes engaged and involved with the focus of inquiry in the quest for knowledge. Creswell (2003) describes this process stating that “qualitative researchers start to understand the context or setting of the participants through visiting this context and gathering information personally. They also make an interpretation of what they find, an interpretation shaped by the researchers’ own experiences” (p. 9). As with the nature of reality, the nature of knowledge in qualitative research is subjective, collaborative, and socially constructed.

The involvement of the researcher in the construction of reality and knowledge in qualitative approaches places the consideration of axiological assumptions as an important area of contrast. The objectivity and detachment that characterizes the stance

of the quantitative researcher can be construed as an attempt to restrain the impact of personal bias on the research outcomes (Creswell, 2003). Quantitative researchers reduce aspects of phenomena to variables that are considered measurable and free from confounding factors. These researchers also rely on reliability and validity claims to support the bias free interpretation of results. On the other hand, qualitative researchers recognize the inherent bias in the research process and “become personally involved with research participants, to the point of sharing perspectives and assuming a caring attitude” (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003, p. 25). Describing the role of values and the qualitative researcher, Creswell (2003) states:

The qualitative researcher systematically reflects on who he or she is in the inquiry and is sensitive to his or her personal biography and how it shapes the study. This introspection and acknowledgment of biases, values, and interests (or reflexivity) typifies qualitative research today. The personal-self becomes inseparable from the researcher-self. (p. 182)

These statements illustrate the participatory nature of the researcher in qualitative inquiry, which is inherently tied to the axiological assumptions of this approach.

The axiological stance of both quantitative and qualitative approaches also informs the methodological assumption of research. The objective quantitative researcher approaches the process of discovery through a foundation of deductive logic (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). Quantitative researchers seek to test predetermined hypotheses, which are developed based on existing theory, through valid and reliable assessment of representative samples and inferential statistical analysis of data. Based on these processes, the discoveries yielded from this research are considered to be

generalizable to a larger population. Qualitative research, being more characterized by subjective and collaborative approaches, seeks out the emergence of themes from data rather than predetermined ideas regarding what data will yield (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Given this substantial difference in data acquisition from quantitative research, qualitative inquiry relies on the concepts of trustworthiness and authenticity in lieu of reliability and validity claims. Trustworthiness refers to a set of criteria that are used to judge the “quality or goodness” or qualitative inquiry (Schwandt, 2001, p. 258). Meeting these criteria ensure that data in a qualitative study accurately represents the sentiments of the participants and that the methods used to collect data were logical, ethical and well documented. In addition, authenticity criteria extend the notion of trustworthiness by advancing the meaningfulness, usefulness, and orientation of qualitative research toward social change (Manning, 1997).

Finally, the use of language, or rhetoric, is an important assumption in making knowledge claims about the problem being studied. Quantitative approaches articulate the dimensions and parameters of a problem in very formal and impersonal ways (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). Variables are defined this manner and results are conveyed through objective research reports that strive for clarity over interpretability. The use of informal language is more characteristic of qualitative inquiry, in which results are conveyed in “interpretive reports that reflect researchers’ constructions of the data [with an] awareness that readers will form their own constructions from what is reported” (Gall, et al., p. 25). Another important aspect of rhetoric in qualitative research is related to the concept of voice. In giving voice to their participants, the researcher interprets the emic perspective. In doing so the research author to “strive to represent clearly and richly the

understanding of what they have learned (the etic perspective)” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 48). In qualitative reporting the researcher is not invisible, as in quantitative reporting, but instead becomes voice of the participants.

Suitability of qualitative approach to the study

Creswell (1998) listed eight reasons to undertake a qualitative study: 1) the nature of the question requires it, 2) the topic needs exploration, 3) there is need for a detailed view, 4) the objective is to study participants in a natural setting, 5) the researcher is interested in a literary style of writing, 6) necessary time and resources exist for extensive data collection, 7) there is a receptive audience for the study results, and 8) the researcher can take the stance of active learner rather than expert. This study fulfills these criteria and is well suited to the qualitative research paradigm because of the general absence of and the gaps in existing research regarding the experiences of gay youth and their families. These deficits have resulted in a lack of breadth and depth with regard to what is known about these families. This research intends to pose questions aimed at understanding the nature of experiences rather than uncovering the reasons for behaviors or reactions among family members. This aim fits well into the qualitative research tradition which poses questions of how and what rather than those that ask why. The research strategy and design, outlined later in this manuscript, will fulfill the naturalistic expectations of Creswell’s aforementioned reasons, as well as speak to the role of the researcher, time elements, and the discursive reporting processes.

Speaking to the role of research on counseling practice, Hazelrigg, Cooper, & Borduin (1987) posit that the linear and reductionistic nature of traditional quantitative research designs and methodologies have been characterized as insufficient to capture the

complexity of family systems. Moon, Dillon, & Sprenkle (1990) call for a research method more consistent with systems theory, pointing out the isomorphism between qualitative research approaches and cybernetic concepts underlying systems theory:

Research is especially “messy” in a field like family therapy, which is concerned with complex, systemic change in human beings. Qualitative research designs may provide a systemic, scientific way of looking at therapy holistically, with all the “messiness” intact. (p. 364)

Here, Moon et al (1990) speak directly to the suitability of a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach to addressing the research problem being considered, due to the complex nature of family systems. Existing theory and research and theory suggest that for families of gay youth, the systems and relationships are made more complex at least in part due to prevalent social messages (Robinson, Walters, & Skeen, 1989; Stone Fish & Harvey, 2005). The unique nature of what Carter and McGoldrick (2005) refer to as vertical stressors, may serve to increase complexity in families of gay youth as “a group’s history, in particular the legacy of trauma in its history, will have an impact of families and individuals as they go through life (e.g....homophobic crimes on homosexuals and heterosexuals)” (p. 6).

Having support in both the professional literature regarding family systems research and qualitative research in general, the current study explores an aspect of lived experience that has not been adequately addressed in the existing body of literature. Given this gap in the literature, the ontological and epistemological assumptions in this research are expansive and constructive. Knowledge claims about gay youth and their families will be derived from the personal accounts of these individuals. Their sense of

reality and knowledge of their experiences will be derived through collaboration with the researcher and the emic perspective will be interpretive and conveyed through an etic account. Given these assumptions about what will be learned and how learning will take place, the approach of the current study decidedly falls within the qualitative tradition.

Paradigm

Interpretivist thinking developed in response and reaction to positivism and logical empiricism with its founders asserting that the goals and methods of the natural sciences were intrinsically different from those of social science (Schwandt, 1994). “They held that the mental sciences or cultural sciences were different in kind than the natural sciences: ...whereas the goal of the former is the grasping or understanding (Verstehen) of the ‘meaning’ of social phenomena” (p. 119). Researchers in this tradition value the subjectivity and status quo assumptions that comprise qualitative frameworks, but also seek to objectify the subjective through known and accepted rubrics of truth. Interpretivists reconcile this dichotomy between subjectivism and objectivism by claiming that “the activity of interpretation is not simply a methodological option open to the social scientist, but rather the very condition of human inquiry itself” (p. 119). In other words, the interpretation of subjective experiences on the part of the researcher cannot be avoided, nor should it. Linked to ontological hermeneutics, interpretivist researchers engage theory in order to understand and describe phenomenology. Schwandt posits that “at best, we can appraise the interpretation [of phenomena] by applying norms or criteria that are compatible with the very condition that demands we interpret in the first place” (p. 122). For the present study, method and data analysis will be informed within an interpretivist paradigm, using theoretical perspectives as

compatible criteria through which to describe and understand the lived experiences of gay youth and their families.

Interpretive Perspectives

Glesne (2006) states that “qualitative research is not explicitly driven by theory, but it is situated within theoretical perspectives” (p. 29). Theory therefore informs research questions and serves as a lens through which data is examined. The interpretation of meaning is the charge of the qualitative researcher, whose goal is not prediction but the “thick description” of human experience (Rossmann & Rallis, 2003). Schwandt (2007) asserts that thick description is more than just “a matter of amassing relevant detail” but instead an interpretation of social action “by recording the circumstances, meanings, intentions, strategies, motivations, and so on that characterize a particular episode” (p. 296). The thickness of the description lies in its interpretation.

The current study will pursue interpretation of lived experiences through both theory and thick description. This pursuit will be accomplished by methodological strategies which will achieve thick description as well as analytical perspectives which will be derived from three theoretical frameworks: Social Constructionism, Family Development Theory, and Queer Theory. Social Constructionism “seeks to understand how social actors recognize, produce, and reproduce social actions and how they come to share an intersubjective understanding of specific life circumstances” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 31). In the context of the current research, this framework will provide those constructions shared by members of families of gay youth. Family Development Theory will situate those constructions within a modernist conceptual framework regarding family systems. Queer Theory, as a postmodern critical framework, will seek to trouble

the heterosexist discourse that is present in those modernist conceptualizations. Through employing these three diverse theoretical perspectives as part of the data analysis, the descriptive nature of participants' experiences can be thickened and in turn, qualitatively distinguished and interpreted.

Phenomenological Research Design

Philosophy

Phenomenology is a branch of philosophy that rejects scientific realism and asserts that meaning in everyday life can only be found by looking beneath the surface of “mere appearance” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 191). Contemporary phenomenology stems from several distinct yet overlapping schools of thought including transcendental, existential, and hermeneutic. Existential phenomenology “is oriented more toward describing the experience of everyday life as it is internalized in the subjective consciousness of individuals (p. 192). In other words, existential phenomenology is the exploration of lived experience. Hermeneutic phenomenology, stemming from the work of philosopher Martin Heidegger, strives “to get beneath or behind subjective experience to reveal the genuine, objective nature of things and [provide] a critique of both taken-for-granted meanings and subjectivism” (p. 192). Moustakas (1994) defines transcendental phenomenology as “a scientific study of the appearance of things...just as we see them and as they appear to us in consciousness” (p. 49). These statements provide grounds for phenomenology as a strategy that explores, makes meaning, and critiques a human phenomenon. This process of critique is inevitable through the interpretation and reinterpretation of lived experiences first by the participant, then by the researcher, and finally by a larger group to whom the lived experiences of research participants are

reported. Van Manen (1990) describes this relationship between exploration and interpretation stating that “phenomenology describes how one orients to lived experience, hermeneutics describes how one interprets the ‘texts of life’” (p. 4). Moustakas (1994) suggests that the challenge in the interpretation of the “texts” is “to explicate the phenomenon in terms of its constituents and possible meanings, thus discerning the features of consciousness and arriving at an understanding of the essence of the experience” (p. 49). The goal of the current study is to discern this “essence of experience” among gay youth and their families.

Phenomenological Method

The method for conducting phenomenological research is described as “a dynamic interplay among six research activities” (van Manen, 1990, p. 30). These six activities are as follows:

1. turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world;
2. investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
3. reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;
4. describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
5. maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;
6. balancing the research context by considering the parts and the whole (p. 30).

In the context of the present study, these research activities serve as a natural extension of the research paradigm. Phenomenology is interpretivist in nature, assuming the stance that a sense of reality is achieved through meaning making or construction on the part of the individual. In addition, phenomenology, as interpretivism, takes into

account contextual variables that impact the individual. Phenomenological research “is always a project of someone: a real person, who, in the context of particular individual, social, and historical life circumstances, sets out to make sense of a certain aspect of human existence” (van Manen, 1990, p. 31).

Bracketing

Van Manen’s phenomenological research activities also address the axiological and rhetorical assumptions of the interpretivist paradigm. Phenomenology requires the researcher to first select a phenomenon which holds personal value and then through the process of bracketing and epoche, the researcher suspends his or her beliefs and experiences of that phenomenon in order to “take a fresh perspective of the phenomenon under examination” (Creswell et al., 2007, p. 254). In terms of rhetoric, van Manen asserts the importance of language in providing a voice to research participants stating that “phenomenology is the application of logos (language and thoughtfulness) to a phenomenon (an aspect of lived experience), to what shows itself precisely as it shows itself” (p. 33).

The goal of bracketing and logos is the creation of new ideas, awareness, and understandings in a thoughtful and reflective manner. The suspension of judgment begins with the researcher as instrument statement and continues through the maintenance of a reflexive journal throughout the course of the research. These documents provide a venue for the qualitative researcher to initiate and continue a narrative that sets forth and processes biases and judgments that may arise during the course of data collection and analysis. Though a difficult and imperfect process, by engaging in bracketing, the qualitative researcher is more able to see things, events, and

people from a fresh perspective, as if for the first time, naïve and unhampered “by voices of the past that tell us the way things are or voices of the present that direct our thinking” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). For the family researcher, pondering how our own family experiences affect what we choose to study and what questions we ask is an appropriate activity (Daly, 1992).

Summary

This discussion of phenomenology creates the overall approach of the research study. Working in concert with the interpretivist paradigm, the constructions of the lived experiences of gay youth and their families are viewed within a phenomenological frame. This framework allows these families to be viewed in their context as they create it and then interpreted through the posited theoretical frameworks. Relational aspects of lived experiences are conveyed through spoken and written word, observable non-verbal behaviors, and contextually bound artifacts. These experiences are then reported with rich descriptive language and text in an effort to convey the essence of the families' experiences. In keeping with phenomenological tradition, the researcher will engage in a process of epoche in order to bracket personal experiences that may be related to the experiences of participants. In order to achieve this bracketing, the researcher composed a Researcher as Instrument Statement (see Appendix B) and maintained a reflexive journal (see Appendix C) throughout the course of the study. The phenomenological research design not only informs the research strategy, but provides a link between the strategy, the perspectives, and the overarching paradigm in this study.

Collective Case Study

The strategy for this research is articulated through both the paradigm and approach. Interpretivism and phenomenology both suggest a strategy that allows for participants to relay their lived experiences in an unfolding and emergent fashion. In addition, an interpretivist phenomenological study is strongly oriented toward discovery and exploration that not only uncovers experience but also creates context. The strategy for the present research incorporates these characteristics into the investigation of intact family systems. In order to accomplish this type of systemic exploration, the current strategy was derived from precedents set in previous research.

Precedent in Research

Doran & Downing-Hansen (2006) conducted a study that parallels the current research by examining the constructions of Mexican American family grief following the death of a child. Taking an ethnographic perspective within an interpretivist paradigm, the researchers conducted interviews with family members which were designed to yield descriptive data. Family members were interviewed individually and collectively in some instances. Researchers incorporated a collective case study method as their research strategy in order gain a sense of the familial experiences of participants. Describing this method authors stated that it “allows for each case to be analyzed separately as well as identification of cross-case themes. As such, the collective case study method allows for the identification of unique and common experience across participants” (p. 202).

In another study, Davey, Askew, and Godette (2003) utilized the collective case study strategy to explore parent and adolescent responses to non-terminal parental cancer.

Citing a phenomenological approach, the authors stated that “the main purpose of this qualitative multiple-case pilot study was...to begin to develop an understanding of how adolescent children are affected by this phenomenon, and to develop insight into how family members adjust to, and cope with non-terminal parental cancer” (p. 247). Thus, in this study, the collective case study was used to explore relational dynamics such as adjustment and coping within families impacted by the phenomenon being examined. Researchers interviewed six intact families about their experiences using a semi-structured (5 prepared questions) and open-ended format.

Suitability for Family Research

In terms of research strategy, these studies provide a foundation for the use of a collective case study approach to exploring relational processes within families of gay youth. Describing the case study approach in a general sense, Stake (2003) suggests that the case in itself is systemic in nature. “In the social sciences and human services, the case has working parts; it is purposive it often has a self...Functional or dysfunctional, rational or irrational, the case is a system” (p. 135). Here Stake makes a direct link between the nature of a general case and the nature of research with families; both are inherently systemic. The relational processes being explored in the current study are indicative of the working parts and purposive nature that Stake describes.

Collective case study involves the collective study of multiple instrumental cases, which are cases that are selected to provide insight regarding an issue or phenomenon (Stake, 2003). The issue being explored in the research is sexuality and how it impacts family systems. According to Stake:

Individual cases in the collection may or may not be known in advance to manifest some common characteristic. They may be similar or dissimilar, redundancy and variety each important. They are chosen because it is believed that understanding them will lead to better understanding, perhaps better theorizing, about a still larger collection of cases. (p. 138)

In keeping with an interpretivist phenomenological approach, the experiences of a select group of families were explored as a collection of case studies to determine what characterizes their relationships.

Suitability to Qualitative Research

According to Stake (2003), case study research within the qualitative tradition is conceptualized around questions that address a particular issue or set of issues, described as “complex, situated, and problematic relationships” (p. 142). The author suggests since qualitative research is oriented toward understanding complexities, that research questions should not be solely constructed for informational purposes but instead should reflect “thematic lines” which relate to the issue at hand. The issues that comprise the study are three-fold. First, a gap exists in the current body of knowledge regarding gay youth and their families. The relational aspects of these intact family systems have not been explored. The present study aims to conduct this exploration, which calls for questions that will illicit broad responses rich with information. In addition, risk factors among gay youth are related to family support (D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). Therefore, research questions were designed to explore those ways in which supportive processes occur within these family systems. Finally, research has determined that social factors have an influence on family functioning (Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Baptist, 2002).

Questions regarding this issue were designed to obtain information regarding how families of gay youth view themselves in the greater social context. Based on this discussion, the current research posed the following questions:

1. How do parents and gay youth make meaning of their experiences as a family?
 - How does having a gay family member impact their process of making meaning?
 - What are their perceptions of their past, present, and future?
 - How is the family lifecycle constructed differently?
2. How is emotional expression characterized in families of gay youth before and after coming out?
 - What are the communication patterns in families of gay youth?
 - How does communication change after the youth's disclosure?
 - What types of emotions are expressed?
 - What emotions go unexpressed?
3. What social factors impact the process of family meaning making?
 - What social concerns exist for the family?
 - What experiences of discrimination, if any, has the family experienced?
 - How do religious beliefs and practices influence meaning making?

Site and Sample Selection

Participants

Participants in phenomenological research are selected based on their current or past experience with the phenomenon being examined (Cresswell, 1998). For the current study, participant families were selected based on the initial criteria that one child, age

18-23, in the family is gay or lesbian and that the other family members participating in the study (parents, siblings, grandparents, etc.) are aware of the child's sexual orientation. By following this base criterion, the current research will access families that are experiencing the phenomenon of having a gay youth as part of their family system. Collective case study designs typically require between 4 and 10 participant families (Davey et al., 2003). The current study recruited 4 participant families. Youth and families received gift cards as a gesture of thanks for their participation. Gift cards were not offered as incentives for participation.

Setting

Ideally, initial family interviews were held in the participants' homes. The environment in which the family resided allowed for the exploration of the contextual factors in each of the cases being studied. In two cases interviews took place in the home of a parent or parents and the other two were held in the home of the gay youth participant. Subsequent interviews with youth were conducted via telephone. All interviews were audio taped. Informed consent was obtained from each participant.

Sampling Procedure

Participants were selected through a purposeful sampling technique. In all cases but one initial contact was made with the youth. In one case initial contact was made with the youth's parent. Purposeful sampling selects "information-rich cases strategically and purposefully; [the] specific type and number of cases depends on the study purpose and resources" (Patton, 2002). The criteria for selection for participation in the study was derived from previous research as an attempt to address the existing gaps, particularly as related to gender, race, and class issues. The original goal of the study was to select

participants such a way that would ensure the representation of groups that are underrepresented in previous research. According to Savin-Williams & Dube (1998) “little is known about the differential impact of disclosure within the context of a single parent home or in various social class families” (p. 10). D’Augelli (2006), citing Morales (1989), states that “another serious omission in the current literature is an examination of the role of ethnicity and race in families of GLB youths” (p. 145). Efforts to recruit participants from non-white, non-European racial and ethnic backgrounds were not successful. In terms of family make up, two participants in the study represent families in which the youth’s biological parents were divorced and at least one parent remarried. For both of these families, interviews took place with the youth and one biological parent. Each family completed a Family Information Sheet (see Appendix D) at the time of data collection. Additional demographic information for each participant family is reported in Chapter Four of this manuscript as part of the within case analyses.

Role of Researcher

Entry

According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994) “access and entry are sensitive components in qualitative research” (p. 211). In order to gain entry into my population of interest, I requested and obtained permission to attend a meeting of the Lambda Alliance at The College of William & Mary and Madison Equality, which are both groups serving the social, political, and emotional needs of their respective LGBTQ campus communities. At these meetings, I explained the purpose of the study and provided students with a flyer which outlined the purpose and details of the study (see Appendix A). Two other families recruited via individuals who knew the researcher and were

familiar with the research project and in turn identified and referred potential participants. Regardless of the referral source, interested youth and/or parents were then contacted directly via email or phone, any questions about the research were discussed, and arrangements for initial interviews were made.

Reciprocity

According to Rossman & Rallis (2003), “reciprocity recognizes the need for mutual benefit in human interaction” (p. 159). Qualitative researchers ask a great deal of participants, particularly in terms of time and personal disclosure, making the concept of mutual benefit in the research experience complex and not necessarily based in equivalency (Glesne, 2006). Reflecting this complexity, Schwandt (2001) states that “reciprocity is part of the larger ethical-political process of building trust, cultivating relationships, and demonstrating genuine interest in those who one studies” (p. 223). This statement positions the qualitative interview as a vehicle to establish the reciprocity that is inherent in the relationship between the researcher and the participant.

As the researcher, I strived to establish reciprocity through the process of active listening during interviews with families. Glense (2006) describes this as “listening to participants carefully and seriously, [giving] them a sense of importance and specialness” (p. 143). Speaking to the qualitative researcher, the author goes on to state that “by providing the opportunity to reflect on and voice answers to your questions, you assist them to understand some aspect of themselves better” (p. 143). Given the potential for transformation that Glense suggests, I also made referral information for counseling and other community based services available to both families and youth in the event that they needed to receive support during and after their participation was complete.

Data Collection

The Qualitative Interview

Investigation of lived experience from a phenomenological viewpoint is a search for meaning. (Van Manen, 1990). “The point of phenomenological research is to “borrow” other people’s experiences and their reflections on their experiences in order to better be able to come to an understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience, in the context of the whole of human experience” (p. 62). The act of “borrowing” lived experience and applying that borrowed information to a larger scope of experience suggests that the data obtained through phenomenological inquiry is by its very nature interpreted and that realities of lived experience are multiple. Relating the phenomenological perspective of the present research to the research strategy, Stake (1995) states that “two principal uses of case study are to obtain the descriptions and interpretation of others. The case will not be seen the same by everyone. Qualitative researchers take pride in discovering and portraying the multiple views of the case. The interview is the main road to multiple realities” (p. 64).

Family Interviews

In order to obtain the descriptions and interpretations of relationships and interactions within the families of gay youth, two family interviews lasting from 60 to 90 minutes were conducted with each family participating in the study. The period of time between interviews was based on convenience for each family and ranged from one to six weeks. An emergent interview style was employed with an interview topic guide as a resource to be used if needed (see Appendix E). According to Swandt (2001), “qualitative studies make greatest use of unstructured, open-ended, informal interviews

because these allow the most flexibility and responsiveness to emerging issues for both respondents and interviewees” (p. 135). Based on this idea, the interview style in the study encouraged emergent responses which will be used to guide discussion in the directions deemed most salient by participants. Each of the two family interviews began with a broad question posed by the researcher, with follow up questions emerging based on the participants’ responses. Observations and impressions of family interactions during these interviews were also be recorded in the researcher’s reflexive journal.

Material Culture

“Qualitative researchers often supplement observing and interviewing with studying aspects of material culture produced in the course of everyday events” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 197). At the conclusion of the first interview, families participating in the study were asked to bring any artifacts that might represent their family, their family relationships, or their family interactions to the second family interview. These artifacts were incorporated into the course of the discussion with each family during the second family interview.

Youth Interview

Given that the research problem is framed by the lived experiences of gay youth, a 30 minute follow-up interview was conducted with each of the originating gay youth from each family. Each youth interview was conducted within one week following the second and final family interview. In keeping with the defined research strategy, this interview was considered as an investigation of a case within a case (Stake, 2003). This emergent interview processed the experiences of the family interviews with each youth as

a means of determining what aspects of the interview were viewed as evidence of family support and processes of resilience.

Reflexive Journal

The nature of qualitative research is interpretative (Creswell, 1994). Because this interpretation occurs through the lens of the researcher's perspective, it is vital to keep a reflexive journal, which can serve as a diary of the researcher's thoughts, feelings, reactions, reflections, hunches, and experiences throughout the research process (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The audiotape of an interview cannot capture "the sights, the smells, the impressions, and the extra remarks said before and after" (p. 107). For the purpose of this study, the researcher's reflexive journal served multiple purposes. First, the journal documented the course of the research and served as an extension of the Researcher as Instrument Statement. In addition, this journal provided a place in which observational data obtained during the family interviews was recorded (see Appendix C).

Managing & Reporting Data

Ethical Considerations

Ethical dilemmas are commonplace in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Rossman and Rallis (2003) state that "ethical situations are not solvable. They are dilemmas that the researcher must reason his [or her] way through, based on intuition, personal values, standards within the profession, and moral principles" (p. 72). In the field of counseling, these professional research standards are included in the code of Ethics and Standards of Practice established by the American Counseling Association (2005). Informed consent in counseling research not only includes describing potential risk to participants, but also requires that participants be informed of any limitations to

confidentiality and of their right to withdraw from participation at any time during the course of the research project. Rossman and Rallis (2003) posit four generic guidelines for the development of informed consent agreements:

1. Participants are fully informed as possible about the study's purpose and audience,
2. They understand what their agreement to participate entails,
3. They give that consent willingly,
4. They understand that they may withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice (p. 75).

The current research study followed these guidelines by obtaining a signed informed consent document (see Appendix F) from each participant prior to involvement in any research activities.

As a final way to assure adherence to ethical considerations, the study was evaluated by the Institutional Human Subjects Review Board at the College of William & Mary. This board is endowed with the responsibility of ensuring that a research study is in compliance with state and federal regulations for the protection of human subjects participating in the study. This process requires submitting the informed consent form described earlier and a description of the purpose, duration, risks and benefits of the research. Approval of the study by the Human Subjects Review Board provides an added check for ethical appropriateness.

Data Analysis

According to Stake (1995), analysis of data begins at the time of collection and involves not only final determinations of themes but also first impressions. Initial and

developing impressions on the part of the researcher were recorded and processed through reflexive journaling during the course of the research. In addition, the Researcher as Instrument Statement served as a bracketing function for the researcher in the current study. By positing this statement, the researcher acknowledged his relationship and involvement with the subject and purpose of the study. The reflexive journal traced the researcher's reactions and personal insights as the study progresses toward completion.

In order to move toward the derivation of broader impressions and themes, each of the transcribed interviews including discussions of family artifacts was analyzed. Rossman and Rallis (2003) suggest the following procedure of generic data analysis:

1. Familiarization with data through data reading and rereading
2. Generation of categories and themes through looking for recurring words
3. Coding in order to link data conceptually
4. Refining of categories and themes through rereading data
5. Interpretation of data, looking for meanings and essences of phenomena
6. Searching for alternative understandings of the data

In addition, observational data as recorded in the researcher's journal was incorporated into the analytical process. Data was delineated by discreet thought and categorically coded as described. While the main focus of categorical data analysis is on generating categories and themes, holistic analysis describes more the linkage of data in the actual contexts studied (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

Verification

Positing an ontological and epistemological basis in multiple and constructed perspectives, validity and reliability claims in qualitative research defy a singular objective approach (Creswell, 1994). These concepts instead are replaced with consideration of trustworthiness and authenticity. Citing the work of Lincoln & Guba (1989), Schwandt (2001) defines trustworthiness as “that quality of an investigation (and its findings) that made it noteworthy to audiences” (p. 258). Rossman & Rallis (2003) base this noteworthy quality in the systematic nature and rigorous standards under which qualitative inquiry is conducted. The related quality of authenticity “aims go generate a genuine or true (i.e., ‘authentic’) understanding of people’s experiences” through the methods of qualitative inquiry.

Creswell (1998) presented 8 useful procedures for verification and recommended that at least 2 of these be incorporated into any given study:

1. Prolonged engagement and persistent observation – involves not only obtaining information, but also building trust and checking for misinformation. In order to accomplish these goals, the study provides for two separate contacts with participant families and one additional contact with the identified gay youth. Interview transcriptions or summaries will be returned to a family selected representative and to the youth in the case of the individual follow up interview, so that the accuracy of information can be verified, any inaccuracies can be detected, and clarifications can be made if necessary.
2. Triangulation – involves the use of multiple methods and theories to provide

corroborating evidence for the existence of a theme. The study utilized two emergent family interviews (to include observational data), material culture from the family participants, and an individual emergent interview with the identified gay youth.

3. Peer review or debriefing – involves an external check of the process. In the study, the researcher engaged in regular consultation with a faculty member(s) on the dissertation committee regarding the collection, management, and analysis of data.
4. Negative case analysis – involves the ongoing refinement of hypotheses in the event that disconfirming evidence appears. The emergent nature of this study's analysis provides for inclusion of this standard.
5. Clarifying researcher bias – involves a Researcher as Instrument Statement by the researcher prior to data collection which delineates experiences, biases, prejudices, and orientations that may have influenced interpretation and approach. (Appendix B)
6. Member checks – are considered to be a crucial technique and involve taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants for verification of accuracy. In the study, audiotape transcriptions of the interviews were returned to the participants for verification, and a summary of the study's findings were offered and provided to participants as requested.
7. Deep, elaborative description – involves detailed description of participants and setting, which facilitates a reader's decision as to the transferability of findings to other settings.

Reporting

In addition to the dissertation publication, results of this study will be presented at various regional and national professional meetings. Articles will be written and submitted to professional publications, and the data gathered for this study will be useful in generating further projects.

Conclusion

The methodology outlined above outlines an exploratory approach to the research problem, which shifts the focus of inquiry from a reductionistic account of incidents and occurrences to a broader view of lived experience. This view emphasizes quality of experience and allows for the employment of a heuristically rich approach to inquiry. This approach addresses gaps in current knowledge and is responsive to contemporary scholarly perspectives while being significant in its own right. Existing research clearly indicates that young people who identify themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or otherwise out of the cultural mainstream of sexuality are consistently at risk. This risk is derived from their decision to live authentically in the world. This topic is worthy of attention and careful inquiry from the field of Counselor Education as a community of scholars, clinicians, and advocates. This sense of worthiness extends to me not only as a member of that professional community but also as a member of the community being studied and my personal desire and striving to minimize suffering and achieve justice for myself and others.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS & WITHIN CASE ANALYSES

Introduction

Chapter Four presents the findings derived from each family case. Themes are presented within the context of the discourse from which they were distilled. Each family is presented separately and in keeping with the phenomenological tradition; their lived experiences are illustrated through the use of their own words. At the heart of each family case is one of four identified youth participants: Cicero, Yasai, Tatiana, and Alison. Along with mothers, fathers, siblings, and partners, the experiences of each of these young people in their families as they constructed them are at the foundation of this inquiry.

Employing an interpretivist paradigm, the data as it is presented in this chapter results from layers of construction and interpretation which are situated in known theoretical frameworks. Each case is presented in three distinct sections. First, using social constructionism as a theoretical lens, individual constructions of reality among family members are blended into a collective voice. As the researcher, my voice also adds to the discourse as I, through the organization and reporting of data, have created my own understanding of each family's story. As is typical in qualitative research, the description of each family is thick and is imparted to the reader in a personalized manner. Each family's story is delineated by themes which emerged from the data. Second, family development theory, as described in Chapter 2, provides a modernist framework for thematic interpretation of the lived experiences of each family. This perspective exemplifies how each family would be conceptualized within current frameworks of

family counseling and counselor education. Finally, a postmodern queer perspective offers a critique of the data and traditional views of family systems. Queer theory is used to illuminate areas of heterosexist ideology present not only in the family system as it was constructed, but also in the ways current theories of family systems attempt to understand and explain family phenomena. Each section begins with an introduction which not only introduces the participants, but also provides demographic information about the family, and describes the researcher's entry into the setting and joining with the family. A summary concludes each case section, in that I as the researcher reflect on the family based on the research data and analysis as well as what emerged through the process of writing each case.

Overview of Analytical Procedure

Analysis of data obtained during interviews began at the time of collection and involved not only final determinations of themes but also first impressions. In addition to the data that was provided in response to interview questions, observational data as recorded in the researcher's reflexive journal was also included in the analysis. Discussions and descriptions of family symbols were included in interview transcripts. After becoming familiar with the data through extensive reading and review, each interview transcript along with observational notations were delineated and coded by discrete thoughts (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). These thoughts were then assigned labels and definitions as part of a code book. For the purpose of within case analyses, one code book was developed for each family case. Coded data was conceptually linked into categories which were developed through a constant comparative method, which follows a pattern or organization and reorganization of categories until themes in the data

emerged (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). The emergence of themes from these categories resulted from interpretation and the search for alternative understanding in the data (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). These themes are presented below in a case by case fashion.

Descriptions & Analyses of Cases

Cicero's Family

"No matter how far or distant apart, we're close where it counts." (Cicero)

Introduction

I met Cicero and his family at the home where Cicero's parents resided located in a small rural town. Cicero, a 23 year old young man, participated in the interviews with his mother and father. The family decided that Cicero's two younger brothers would not be a part of the research. In terms of demographic characteristics, Cicero described his family as Caucasian, Christian, and middle class. Our first interview took place in a front room of their home, where the family sat across from me with Cicero between his parents, who seemed positioned as flanks of support for their son. The room was right inside the front door where I entered, sparsely furnished and somewhat formal. The second interview took place in a family room in the back of their home off the kitchen. During this interview, rather than sitting across from the family, I was positioned among them, between Cicero and his father. This space was much more personal and comfortable, a family space. Being in this room with Cicero and his parents gave me the sense that I had been allowed a glimpse deeper into the family's lives together. The family's symbol was a folk art depiction of *Noah's Ark*, which not only reflected the family's spiritual roots, but was also an illustration of the family's feelings about love

and commitment. The family spoke openly and honestly to me and to one another. Differing opinions and even disagreements were accepted, communication was respectful, and emotions were expressed freely. Through words and actions I was able to get a sense of the closeness of this family and the importance of maintaining close connections.

Themes

Five themes emerged from the data collected through interviews, observation, and the presentation of artifacts. The first theme, *Growing Up Gay*, manifests not only Cicero's individual experiences, but the experiences of his parents and his family as he encountered both support and homophobia as a child, adolescent, and young adult. *Coming Out* is comprised of those constructions that indicate how Cicero's disclosure of his sexuality was experienced and understood within the context of the family system. The third theme, *Relationship Dynamics* reflects those descriptions of family relationships including closeness, distance, communication, support, and roles. *Family & Community* reflects the family's experiences outside of the family system through their interaction and involvement with their community and social institutions. *Family Tree*, the fifth and final theme that emerged from the data, articulates the family's constructions of their family over time, including the influences of their families of origin and those patterns and values that have persisted within their family system for generations.

Growing Up Gay

Cicero grew up in a small town with his parents and his two younger brothers. Early on during our first interview Cicero's mother and father described their family as "traditional." They spoke of their 30 years of marriage and the intentional ways in which

they planned their family, where they wanted to raise children, and the development of a dual career household.

Cicero's father explained one way in which they were a "traditional" family. "Yeah, I would say fairly traditional. I think we were interested in living and having a family in a relatively small town. We were not interested in a major metropolitan area. And certainly [this town] fit the bill." Cicero described the impact of living in a small town in several different ways, positing both positive and negative aspects. "...I got to have a pretty good childhood. This is a very safe area. I got to hang out and do whatever I wanted. I didn't have to worry about feeling safe or anything like that." His feelings of safety and comfort were set in opposition to what was somewhat of a unique disadvantage of small town life for him.

I think the down side was not having any role models that matched myself and who I am.

...I mean there's very very few if any at all openly gay people in a small town like this. And I had to work a lot harder at figuring out that it was ok to be gay. And to be comfortable with it for myself.

Cicero's father agreed with his son's statement but pointed out that "openly gay" was a key distinction. "You said, Cicero, openly gay, but you do realize that there were a number of gay men and women that you knew growing up." His mother noted that over time, she had "gradually gotten acquainted and become friends with many gay people." Despite some level of contact between his family and other gay people, Cicero was keenly aware that being gay was not openly discussed. Over time, this silence began to have an impact.

Yeah. I mean like growing up and you're a youth and you don't feel, unless it's something that people talk about and are open about, you feel very isolated, or at least I did. I kind of always felt, even in elementary school, I'd feel like a bit of an odd ball. Not quite fitting in with any group. The more I became cognizant of my sexuality, the more it was in my face that I didn't fit in. It wasn't until I really came back from my first year at college and started to learn who I could talk to about it and where I could go for support. Really not until the brink of coming into adulthood did I feel like I could go somewhere and get support.

At the crux of Cicero's experiences growing up gay in his community was his schooling. Cicero described both his high school and college experiences to be particularly difficult. He described his peers in high school as "relentless" using "every chance they would get [to] make some sort of derogatory gay joke." He shared a specific incident of harassment in school. "I even remember in math class, sometimes you switch papers with somebody and grade their paper, and I got my paper back and it was like 'you're gay, ha, ha, ha'." Cicero's father too remembered an incident in middle school when Cicero was being bullied by other students and he felt particularly supported by the school principal. "The principal handled it in the end I thought very well. ...From our perspective he really came and intervened in an appropriate way." Cicero concurred stating that "it [the harassment] seemed to stop."

By the time he reached college, Cicero had become increasingly dejected stating that "it was extremely isolating...socially isolating for me. There were no other gay students. And, just, on multiple different levels it was just a horrible experience." During college, Cicero began to realize that this isolation was broader than the personal

attacks that he had experienced in high school. Coming to terms with his sexual feelings proved to increase his feelings of isolation and loneliness.

...it wasn't exactly aimed at me per se, but I would say I never felt more discriminated against in a sense than my freshmen year in college. I just felt so completely isolated, once I had come out, I just really felt extremely alone. Maybe it wasn't an active effort on people's parts. But it was just so uninviting and sort of a very cold place.

Being in such a cold and isolating environment, Cicero reached out to others attempting to find solace in relationships, at times knowing that he was not making positive choices.

I think somewhere I kind of always knew that he wasn't the right guy. In fact in the beginning, he pursued me, and I wasn't interested at first. But I think as time went on and I was feeling increasingly more lonely at college, I became more open to the idea. Just to have someone to relate to.

Realizing the isolation and loneliness that Cicero was experiencing at college, Cicero's father intervened by contacting the "head of the counseling center" at this school to inquire about resources for his son. He shared the view that his action "seemed to me for my role as a father to be an appropriate intervention under those circumstances for a first year college student." After his first year, Cicero transferred to a university in a large urban area. His mother reflected on her concerns about Cicero leaving the small town environment he had lived in all his life. "Once he got to [the city] and seeing him there, I was like, oh my gosh, this is where he belongs. This is his place. So I had to let go of any worry because he was happy."

Coming out

Cicero's experiences growing up in a small town with his family became the backdrop for his discovery of who he was as well as his family's understanding of having a gay son and sibling. During our time together, Cicero's parents also spoke frankly about their perceptions of these experiences. While Cicero had officially come out to his parents six years earlier, his mom and dad mentioned earlier clues about their son's sexual orientation. Dad spoke of some experiences from Cicero's childhood and adolescence that he described as "painful." In addition to the stories about Cicero being picked on at school, Dad mentioned a specific incident stating "...that was one of the more painful clues. Probably the most painful clue, in that there was an inappropriate relationship between this boy and Cicero that came out." Cicero's mother also recalled a memory that was a precursor to Cicero disclosing his sexual orientation to his parents. She spoke to Cicero in a gentle and tentative manner.

You were sitting here at the computer. I happened to see what you...I happened to see...I came in on you unexpectedly. ...Do you remember that? I asked you why you were looking at those pictures? And you said, I really wasn't ready to tell you now.

Cicero also sought clues from his parents about how they might react if he disclosed to him that he might be gay. On a car ride with his dad, he shared how he "opened the door" regarding his sexuality.

Even before college, one of my first interactions that I remember that he and I were on the road together for something. We stopped at a restaurant and I asked him a question, I forget exactly how I worded it. The answer was something to

the effect that he guessed that he would be okay with having a gay son. And that kind of like opened the door a little bit to think that gee, maybe I am.

These early clues not only set the stage for Cicero to tell his parents about his sexual orientation but also, along with the strength of their relationships, helped prepare the family to manage his disclosure. The family did not ignore these indications, but instead gave thoughtful recognition and consideration to who their son was and who he might become. His father shared this:

I mean there were little indicators to us over the years. None of which in itself...I mean in my opinion, who knows what sexual orientation is when you're 8 or 9 or 10. And then maybe when you're 11, 12, and 13 the questions become more urgent for obvious reasons. But I think there were certain things with Cicero that were sort of clues to us.

Cicero's disclosure to his parents regarding his sexual orientation seemed to be the culmination of his experiences, both positive and negative, growing up in his community and within the context of his family system. "I think it was a process. Coming out to them. Them being increasingly comfortable with it. I think now we've moved to a point where everybody's fine." This "process" as Cicero described it was inherently relational for his family. Cicero first disclosed to his mother, who spoke of her initial reaction stating, "Certainly when I first realized it I was upset...but I don't think there was any major trauma....and certainly no pushing Cicero away. That wouldn't even be part of [it]." Cicero's father seemed to concur and stated that on some level he felt prepared for his son's disclosure.

So it's not like it came as a huge shock or anything like that. So that puts it in context for me in terms of some level of, I'm not sure, family and cultural preparation. I'm not saying that made it all hunky dory and just wonderful and smooth and everything. It's still...it's like that old movie, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*.

Despite some level of expectation, preparation, and familiarity, which included friendships and collegial relationships with gay men and lesbians in their community, Cicero's parents recognized and expressed the inimitability of their own experience. Dad acknowledged,

You know, it's like wait a minute, what if it happens in your own house, in your own family. That's different. ...it's more emotional. For all of what I've said now as having been so confident, it still jerked me a little bit and I hadn't really anticipated that.

Cicero's mother, in particular, spoke of the process of adjusting the way in which she saw the future of her family. "I just had to readjust everything....especially the part about...wanting to have daughters, and granddaughters, and grandchildren...and just adjusting to that and accepting that took some time." Dad added to mom's thoughts sharing that "it wasn't a matter of being happy or unhappy, at least to me, it was more a matter of adjusting."

Relationship Dynamics

Managing this adjustment despite the early clues and preparation seemed intrinsically part of the family's relational dynamics. Our discussion of communication patterns and rules was indicative and illustrative of the essence of family process. This

essence was not only expressed through reflective descriptions of experience but was observable during the family interviews. Characterizing the process of adjustment, Cicero's mom shared, "Cicero's dad and I, I think we process things well, I mean we talked a lot. Made time to talk. We certainly didn't hide it. We did hide it from Cicero's youngest brother." The decision to not share Cicero's disclosure with this youngest brother shows an example of how the family set rules around communication. During the interview, Cicero and his father reflected on this decision. Their discussion seemed to illustrate the overall communication pattern that characterizes family interactions. Referring to the decision not to tell his brother, Dad asked Cicero, "Did that seem right to you at the time?" Cicero replied,

I think looking back on it, I kind of had some doubts or something. Just because I kind of feel like, if it's nothing to be ashamed of, then what's the point of hiding it. And say I do have children some day, then obviously the children of a gay couple are going to know. So I mean in that sense I kind of look back on it and I'm just like did we really need to do that?

After listening to his son, Dad responded by explaining his reasoning at the time. "Well, I think the reasoning, at least for me wasn't so much in our family, as much as social peer pressures within a very traditional school community. In that context. And wondering how he would handle that at that time." This exchange illustrated to me as an observer how the family was able to share and understand different viewpoints without a high degree of contention and conflict, but rather with openness to learning from each other.

Aspects of support within the family were regularly expressed over the course of the interviews. Cicero described his family as "close where it counts" and offering

“unconditional love” not only in relation to his sexuality but in other areas as well. He shared that even before he disclosed his sexual orientation to his family, he received a great deal of support in other aspects of his life. During the course of the second interview, Cicero pointed to his father that this was the case.

Because here I felt like even though I wasn't ready, I still felt a lot more love and support. Even if I had to sort of focus it on different areas, like other aspects of my life, at least it was there. It was just small bits and pieces coming from other people.

This statement suggests that support within Cicero's family is foundational, not specific to a time, place, or event, but ubiquitous and prevailing. As Cicero sat with his parents at his side, like pillars of support, he shared with me the depth at which his family has shaped him and his sense of self. “My family. Absolutely. I know I wouldn't be the person that I am today without their support.”

As the family discussed what they had learned from one another, a great deal of socialization seemed to occur not only around a deeper understanding of gay people but also regarding relationships of all types. “My parents have helped me enormously in learning how to be in a solid stable committed relationship.” Making this statement, Cicero alluded to the fact that these relationship lessons seemed to occur through word and deed. He not only grew up observing his parents' relationship, but relationships were a topic of family conversation as well.

My dad drove me back to the airport and on our car ride home, he was telling me, ...something that he had done like around my age and so then we talked some more about it and I got to learn some more of like my parents' history from him.

Like they were first starting out as a couple and the things that they had done and so that was kind of cool.

Cicero's parents shared how having a gay son had influenced their beliefs about family and relationships and how they had changed their views and perceptions as they had observed their son in relationships. Encountering one of Cicero's college friends, Mom described how she attempted to make sense out of her negative reactions.

Cicero had a friend visit, that you connected with at college, who came here for one weekend. ...That was an interesting experience, knowing that he was more than a "friend" probably. ...The interesting thing was that after he left, it just didn't feel like there was a good connection between you, and I certainly couldn't connect with him. [laughs] But that led to...okay, is this because he's male, or is this because I don't like him as a person?

This questioning seemed to initiate a process of reconstructing Mom's ideas and beliefs. Referring to their family symbol, a folk art depiction of Noah's Ark, Cicero's mother talked about how the ideas she had about coupling had changed. "I also think, I hadn't thought of this until now, the two by two, what that means and how it has changed for me. That has expanded my definition...The traditional male and female, but certainly that's changed." His mother added to these thoughts, speaking directly to her son.

So that idea that I had at one time, Cicero, that you could not be a father, that may not be true at all. You mentioned it, if you and your partner would want to adopt children some day that would be wonderful. You have so much to give.

Here Cicero's mother seemed to express to him that she has transcended some ideas that she once held regarding same-sex couples and relationships and offers him support and affirmation.

By all accounts, Cicero's family is warm and caring toward one another and with supportive concern characterizing relationships. Closeness among family members, another aspect of the family's relational dynamics, were discussed and described within the context of family roles and individual personalities. Sharing that he was closest with his parents, Cicero clarified closeness in his family by stating that "I've always been very very close with my mom. ...And then...it's weird...The things that I feel close with my youngest brother about are the things that I feel distant with the middle brother and vice versa." Adding to these thoughts, Mom clarified the parent-child relationship with Cicero. "Cicero talks with me about matters of the heart and he talks with his dad about matters with the head." Mom also shared how the cohesion that seemed to be indicative of the family system, particularly between her and Cicero, had changed as he had matured and moved on with his own life. "Cicero had mentioned that we have been close. We're not as close as we had been when he was living here. But that's important to separate."

Family & Community

Outside of the immediate family system, the family spoke of supportive relationships among friends in the community and extended family. One incidence of support from family friends came through Cicero's youngest brother, who confided in a close friend that his older brother was gay. Cicero's mother shared that this family "saw it as an opportunity to talk to their own sons about homosexuality." She went on to state

“that’s the kind of support we have in this community. It’s wonderful.” Familiar with this situation, Cicero was somewhat surprised at the family’s reaction. “When I found out last year it totally blew my mind. Honestly, it was unexpected; because they seem like the typical conservative family, who would not at all be comfortable with the subject. So I was very pleasantly surprised.”

Cicero also found friendships in the community which not only provided him with support, but also compensated to some extent for what he didn’t feel comfortable receiving from his family.

Things that I felt like I couldn’t talk about with them, I began to find other avenues through a few lesbian students at school. And then, even though there weren’t any other gay co-workers [at my job] with one exception, my one manager was lesbian, a lot of the straight girls were comfortable and I felt like I really could talk to them and confide in them. So that actually became something.

When asked about those things that he couldn’t talk about with his parents, Cicero stated “I felt like I could talk with my parents [about] feeling different, who to confide in, how to be sensible about it, things like that. What I didn’t feel comfortable with at the time was talking about my own experiences.” His parents chuckled at this statement and suggested that it would be an “unusual adolescent” to share certain things with your parents. Mom stated, “Well it doesn’t matter what sexual orientation you are, you’re not going to confide in your parents.... [laughter].”

In terms of social and cultural institutions that influenced the family system, the role of the church and religion was a recurring topic throughout the family interviews. Cicero’s father stated that “growing up we were very active in the church here.” The

family's local church was consistently portrayed as a source of comfort and support.

Cicero's father described their church setting as "interesting."

It's pretty clear to us that the leadership of that church and some significant number of the families in it are either actively supportive of people who are gay and have their own family members who are gay or they are just quiet about it. ...There are certainly people in that congregation who are cultural conservatives and are if not homophobic are pretty ignorant of homosexuality. But I don't think they dominate. We couldn't belong to a church where that dominates.

Cicero's mother was quick to agree with this statement, echoing quite emphatically that her family could not belong to a homophobic congregation. She also shared how she had been able to make supportive spiritual connections through a "feminist Christian" women's group affiliated with her family's denomination. "...In that circle, for years I heard about having gay kids. And then all the sudden I have one. And here's an automatic support group. ... I was very gratified to have that support and I still am."

While, as Cicero's dad pointed out, "organized religion is not as important a part of [Cicero's] life now," both he and his son agreed that the church offered Cicero supportive outlets as a child and adolescent. In response to Cicero's statements about not having gay role models around when he was an adolescent, his father quickly pointed out that there were gay individuals in their church community. In addition, his dad stated that, "By and large, I think Cicero probably had pretty good experiences especially in the singing and drama at church." Cicero agreed with his dad, but did call attention to the fact that the apparent acceptance he received at church did not extend to other settings such as school. "...Maybe not in church, but the same kids that went to church would

also go to my high school, [and] I could hear them say something at school. A lot of kids would say all kinds of ridiculous slurs and things.”

Cicero was not the only family member who described experiences with homophobia in the community. His mother, in particular, shared her feelings of discomfort and not feeling “safe” at work. “I don’t feel free to talk about Cicero as a gay man in my workplace. I don’t feel I can confide in my colleagues. I’m not sure if it would be safe to do that. I think that is terribly sad.” In response to a interview question regarding the family’s experiences of discrimination, Mom again alluded to the fact that the family has found safety within certain “circles,” where they can be open. “I guess, again, more outside of our circle. I’ve certainly heard some homophobic ideas in elementary school setting among the faculty. So it’s not something I’m willing to discuss at all there.”

Cicero’s father’s experience at work was described quite differently. Also an educator, his work environment seemed to afford him the opportunity to connect with his gay students. He spoke of how having a gay son has influenced these connections.

But I think to that I’m probably more sensitive with the [students] who I work with at the college, probably more than ever before, but not perhaps quite so much because they’re gay exactly as much as being the parent of a gay son means I also see them through parental filters too. So that’s different.

In addition to connections with individuals, Cicero’s dad was somewhat of a pioneer for gay rights in his work community.

And then at the college where I work, in the late 80's, I was part of the group that began to open the doors a little bit so it was a safer place. ...I played something of a participatory role in helping get a more open community at that college.

This advocacy role at work has been extended into other areas of Cicero's father's community life. In addition, his roles in the community are consistently informed by his familial roles and experiences.

In my role as a school board member, I pay attention to that indirectly. I have not played an advocacy role to make sure that there is no discrimination. I've chosen not to do that at this time in this context. On the other hand, my ears are always attuned to that as the father of a gay son and if I caught any wind that there was some institutionalization or policies that were directly discriminatory, I would be the very first to say this cannot stand and I would do everything in my power to combat it.

Family Tree

The final theme that emerged from the data encompassed the family constructions of their past, present, and future, and included discussions related to families of origin, roles in the family, longevity and commitment, and geographic closeness of family members. These points of discussion again comprised what the family characterized as "traditional." In addition to describing the circumstances around meeting his wife and their early marriage, Cicero's father pointed out that the context of the family influenced the meaning of the term "traditional."

I suppose traditional too in the sense that dual careers have become traditional with our generation, baby boomers. When we came here I was at the college and

my wife was intending to do begin her graduate studies, which she did. So, not the entire time, but for a considerable amount of time [Cicero's mom] has been working either full or part-time during much of our marriage.

In response Cicero's mom stated that "I'd say that I chose to stay home and work part-time while the boys were young and to step out of a career track." Dad also mentioned that "in terms of family ties, again I'm not sure this is all that non-traditional any more, our families are scattered." Despite the implications of what could be described as more contemporary career choices and in some cases geographic separateness, Cicero's parents seemed to place importance on remaining connected with the people, traditions, and values that comprised their family.

One such value which ran through the meaning of what was traditional for this family was a foundation of spirituality. Early on in our discussion, Cicero's mom stated, "We came from very similar backgrounds. We were both Presbyterian preachers' kids so we were drawn to a small college in Ohio, where we met." As the family discussed and described their symbol, Cicero's mother put the role of faith in the family in perspective.

I was the Noah's Ark collector. I'm not so much anymore. But I really liked this one because of the circle. The strength and the unity in the circle. And also the family tree in this particular folk art depiction. This family is built on such strong faith and love on both sides. I think that's important.

Cicero's father add, "...there is the biblical allusion there and we should say that Cicero's, both of his grandfathers are clergymen. Growing up we were very active the Presbyterian Church here." Even as the practice of spirituality and organized religion

has changed for some family members, Cicero in particular, his father posited that “the tradition [of religion] is there within the family. The roots and connections are there.”

Coupling also emerged as an important value in Cicero’s family. Cicero’s parents spoke of their family as “being intact, still married after 30 years.” They also indicated that Cicero’s grandparents were in long-term marriages. Mom expressed heartfelt feelings about her children and their ability to engage in close caring bonds with others. “I see Cicero as a very nurturing kind of person. ...Every one of our sons has that aspect. We can be with family and friends who have small children, infants even, and I’ve seen all three of them be nurturing.” Cicero’s mother was also very affirming of Cicero’s relationship with his current partner. Speaking of when she first met him, she shared, “I was like wow, what a great guy. What a great person. So I just felt like he seemed to know Cicero. He seemed to understand Cicero. And we talked about that a lot.” She added an invitation in what I perceived to be a sincere and earnest moment with her son.

I would just like to say that we have invited Cicero’s partner to come here. He’s never been to our home. And maybe share some holidays with us. I want him to know that he’s welcome. And I think, I sense some reluctance on his part, maybe some fear, that that would be hard for him. And yet, Cicero, when he’s ready, I’m ready. I’m ready to extend the circle. There’s the five of us but it’s more now.

And you’re really happy in your relationship.

During my follow up interview with Cicero, he mentioned that these statements from his mother were particularly meaningful. “Well it was really, really good when my mom said something about being ready to open our family circle to my partner, that was really amazing...I know that he was really happy to hear that.”

Family Development Perspective

The themes that emerged from the constructions of Cicero's family have implications for several aspects of relational functioning. The family created a rich internal context which had a variety of relational processes at its disposal to help the family navigate their external social environment. This environment was not only a small rural town, but also a variety of social and cultural institutions. Organizationally, the family seemed to present appropriate boundaries which were characterized by a balanced degree of flexibility and firmness. The family held a value for history, but did not allow their background to dictate their future. Traditions, values, and underlying ways of thinking were adapted to meet the needs of a changing world and a changing family system. Subsystems were well delineated and strengthened through respectful interaction and communication.

Communication was definitely a strength for Cicero's family, and on several occasions I was able observe the negotiation of disagreements and miscommunication. These negotiations among family members were consistently handled with respect for each other. Cicero's parents mentioned positive and intentional communication several times, suggesting that they shared a strong coalition. Rules for communication regarding Cicero's sexuality were present and in place to protect his younger siblings from harassment from those outside of the family system. Communication also served as a tool for Cicero as he was able to share with his parents his own experiences of marginalization and receive support and guidance.

Although parental roles were somewhat dichotomous between the "head and heart," self-awareness among family members seemed high, with individual differences

perceived as positive. From observations made during the interviews, Cicero was adept at interacting with each of his parents in a productive and effective manner. The emotional climate of the family was characterized by a high level of closeness, caring, and acceptance. Emotions were expressed freely over the course of the family interviews, particularly around gestures of support for Cicero. Shared values were apparent among family members, particularly the value of spiritual faith and committed relationships.

The coming out experience for the family was particularly salient. The family spoke very openly about their perspectives and reactions. Emotional expression during these discussions was frequent and often reflected Cicero's parents' concerns for his well-being. The family was keenly aware of homophobia and its impact. Cicero and his mother both spoke of experiencing situations and settings that did not feel safe. The relational climate of the family, however, seemed to serve as a safe haven from social hostility. Within the context of family relationships, feelings were shared, emotions expressed, and conflicts resolved. Even in situations that were described as quite painful, Cicero's parents stood by his side and worked to keep him safe and securely embedded in the family system.

The family balanced their appreciation for family history with a progressive look toward the future. Cicero's mother very openly described how many of the thoughts she held originally had changed as she looked to the future. She extended an invitation for Cicero's partner to come into the family, recognizing that "two by two" was not a gendered ideal. This invitation seemed validating for Cicero, putting his relationship on equal footing with his family's long history of committed partnerships. Cicero's mother also recognized him as a potential parent, articulating those qualities about him that

transcend gender and sexual orientation. These aspects of the family were certainly not static, but instead evidence of dynamic, adaptive, and ultimately supportive relational processes.

Queer Theory Critique

Queer theory provides a postmodern critical lens that situates Cicero's family within the field of dominant culture. By employing this theoretical perspective on the data presented here, elements of heterosexism operating within the lived experiences of the family become apparent. Those experiences salient to a queer critique exist both within and outside of Cicero's family.

Perhaps most obviously, the blatant harassment and marginalization that Cicero encountered and felt in school environments served as an illustration of dominant cultural attitudes toward individuals who are not heterosexual. Cicero's presence in his classes and on his campus presented a challenge to the heterosexual values not only held by many of his peers, but of the institutional systems themselves. Within these environments, incidents of harassment may have been addressed by counselors and administrators, but no evidence of a cultural shift within the institution was apparent in the data. As reported, Cicero's father spoke of one such incident during his son's middle school years, prior to his disclosure, which he thought was "handled very well" as that the principal "came and intervened in an appropriate way." Cicero's response to his father's statement was that "it [the harassment] seemed to stop." Cicero's suffering at the expense of this heterosexist based bullying did not stop, as he reported increasing isolation and loneliness as he advanced through high school and into college, which he described as "uninviting" and a "very cold place." These perspectives were based on his

frame of reference as an out gay young man. He shared that “once I came out, I just really felt extremely alone.” As Cicero began to accept himself as someone who was not heterosexual, social forces began to push against him more strongly, forcing him toward the cultural margins as if to challenge him to deny himself and conform to the dominant or be shunned. Being “out” had pushed him “out.”

These and other external incidents also became challenges within the family. Early experiences and incidents began to give Cicero’s parents clues that their son might not be heterosexual. These early clues, some of which his father described as “painful,” seemed to have initiated a change in thinking about the family context and the values that comprised it. How would a “traditional” family be sustained with a gay child as a member? How would relationships with extended family be affected? What about the future of the family? These questions are central to a queer critique of Cicero’s family system. The material culture that the family presented certainly conveyed expectations for Cicero, expectations that could certainly be critiqued as heterosexist. The depiction of Noah’s Ark that the family selected as their symbol was constructed around its biblical meaning as well as the notion that coupling was necessary to sustain the future of the family. A queer critique would easily deconstruct this notion around heterosexist (and biblical) constructions of marriage and reproduction. Interestingly, based on his own discussion of the symbol, Cicero seemed to buy into this construction which his current relationship queered by its very nature. He and his family, however, were able to accommodate his relationship into their collective vision of their family’s future.

Given the nature of the family structure, the future of the family and Cicero’s place in it was inescapably tied to the past. The coming out process occurred in layers for

Cicero's family with his initial disclosure leading to intentional consideration given to who else would know. Telling Cicero's grandparents on both sides presented a challenge. "It took a while for us to be free to talk about with our parents. Certainly telling Cicero's dad's parents was easier...they had guessed. I'd been a little worried about telling my parents." The recursive nature of marginalization is inherent in this statement from Cicero's mother. Like a stone breaking the smooth surface of a docile pond, the social issues that had challenged Cicero to conform or be shunned began to ripple through the family system.

Disclosure to Cicero's youngest brother also became an issue once Cicero was out in the family system. The decision not to tell, which was described as an "unspoken rule" of communication, was rationalized as developmental and protective. Cicero's father explained this rationale stating, "But with the youngest it was something we decided to be discreet about within the family. For him, rightly or wrongly, maybe for developmental reasons in terms of his ability to understand it." During the family's discussion of this issue, Cicero effectively deconstructed his parent's decision, when he stated his doubts about their decision asking, "If it's nothing to be ashamed of, then what's the point of hiding it?"

Evidence of queering within the family system was present in the theme titled relational dynamics, and was particularly evident in socialization processes. Having a gay son had begun to shift thoughts and ideas in the family. This came across in exceptionally salient ways when the family discussed their symbol.

Mom: I also think, I hadn't thought of this until now, the two by two, what that means and how it has changed for me. That has expanded my definition of...

D: That's an interesting thought too given the traditional concept...

M: The traditional male and female, but certainly that's changed.

This dialogue illustrated the shifting ideas about what is "traditional" in Cicero's family. Again, like a ripple in a pond, what Cicero's parents have learned from having a gay son will impact the socialization of their other children, as well as former and future generations with regards to gender and sexuality.

Summary & Reflections

As the first interview in this research study, Cicero's family offered a wonderful introduction to the researcher into the realm of families of gay youth. As I got to know the family and began to create a picture of their experiences, I was honored to have the chance to experience the warmth and honesty they offered to each other. Their constructions of their experiences as reported here offer some poignant moments and shared truths. While family development theory offered a functional and favorable analysis of this family, queer theory challenged the heterosexist ideas to which the family ascribes as well as provides an alternative lens through which to understand family functioning. Thus, Cicero's family initiated the continuing discourse of the four family participants.

Yasai's Family

"I don't like it. But it's for selfish reasons that I don't. And I don't want him to get hurt.

But I think that's natural for a mother." (Yasai's Mother)

Introduction

Yasai was referred to me by his local PFLAG chapter. His initial contacts with me were very direct and straightforward, two qualities which I came to understand

epitomize Yasai's personality. When he completed the family information sheet, Yasai described his family as Caucasian, European, middle class, Christian, and Buddhist, a faith which Yasai had adopted separate from his family. Yasai was 20 years old and a student in community college, where he was studying to enter a medical field. He had been out to his family for almost three years.

Yasai's mother and his current partner participated in the family interviews. We met for both interviews at the home he shared with his partner. Although growing up the family had lived in several areas of the United States, Yasai finished high school in a small rural town located in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S., which is where his family resides today. The family was warm and welcoming almost immediately. The interviews took place in the living room of the home where the family shared many personal details of their lives together often in emotional ways. The family did not bring a family symbol to the second interview as requested, but I did receive a tour of the home that Yasai and his partner shared, which gave me a glimpse into their lives that I did not get from other participant families. The personal spaces that Yasai's family shared, both physical and emotional, allowed me to gain an understanding of their pain and joy, as well as their resilience and the driving forces behind what held them together.

Themes

Six within case themes emerged from the data collected with Yasai's family. The first two themes, *Constructions of Family* and *Relationship Dynamics*, serve to create the internal context of the family as they characterized not only the perceptions of the family but also the quality of experiences being part of this system. The external context of the family is delineated between two themes as well. *Marginalization* and *Positive Social*

Influences describe the ways in which social pressures and supports have had an impact on the family. *Family Transitions* embody those events and experiences which had a significant impact on the family members and the family system as a whole. One such experience described under this theme is Yasai coming out to his family. *Partner & Family* is the last theme, which describes the status of Yasai's relationship with his partner and the impact of that relationship on his family.

Constructions of Family

During our first family interview, Yasai and his mother spent some time describing their family in terms of those individuals who were presently considered part of the family as well as information regarding family history. When asked to describe their family, Yasai's mother responded with humor saying, "One word. Dysfunctional." She and Yasai went on to characterize the family by using terms such as "strange" and "not average." When asked whom was a member of the family, Yasai responded by designating not only membership, but also relational characteristics. "My partner, mom, my real dad, although I don't talk to him much, my brother, it depends on the day. And my niece and nephew. I do not relate myself whatsoever to the mothers of those children. I hate them."

Yasai's mother also spent some time describing her family and Yasai's grandparents. Being adopted as a child, she grew up on a farm with many siblings who she referred to as "free labor" for her father. "We had a farm first and then all of his free labor left; all of his kids left. Him and mom couldn't do it by themselves and he replied to an ad and moved lock stock and barrel." She went on to describe the nature of her relationship with her parents, particularly her mother.

My mother and I aren't close, never have been close. I've always tried to please them because I've never quite made it to their level that they expected. I was the middle one. I was never good enough as my older brother and I was never as smart as my sister, which I was, but [not] in their eyes. So I spent my whole life trying to please someone else. So I quit smoking and the biggest motivation was they'll like me then.

The feeling of "never [being] good enough" that Yasai's mother described here was echoed as she spoke about the criticism she received from her parents about her role as a mother. "It's just that they've always blamed me. Everything the kids got into, it was always my fault, I wasn't a good mother. I didn't take them to the right church. I was divorced and trying to raise two boys."

Messages about her adequacy and mothering from Yasai's grandparents were also present and related to Yasai and his brother.

Matter of fact, my mother said when this child [Yasai] was born who's the father of that one? I said the same one that fathered the other one. She said well he sure don't look like him. And I said that's very rude, mom, to say that to me. And she's still saying it because he's going to college and getting good grades and there his brother...

This message resonated throughout the interview with the family as Yasai and his brother often drawn into contrast. While his mother felt close to Yasai, she often compared him to his brother who seemed to have more inconsistent relationships with his family.

"Yasai and I were so close, and my other son, they're as different as night and day, and he's been... into drugs and all this crap. ...He's everything Yasai isn't."

Like his brother, Yasai's stepfather, who did not participate in the interview, was often a source of mutual disdain for Yasai and his mother. Describing her marriage as a "major mistake" she shared that her husband "was very abusive to Yasai and he's verbally abusive to me. He really puts me down." Yasai's mother further characterized her husband's feelings about her gay son.

Yeah he is [aware that Yasai is gay] but he doesn't accept him. He can't stand Blacks and he can't stand gays and he don't care who tells it. I'm trying to get the situation so I can get him out of my life, but you can't do that if you don't have a nickel in the pot.

Yasai described specific incidents of harassment and marginalization that originated from within his household at the hands of his stepfather. He talked with his mother about one such incident that involved physical violence involving destruction of property. "That was, I think, a couple months after he [stepdad] found out I was gay. He was calling me a fuckin' faggot and a cock sucker. You called the cops and I ran off to work." This type of incident as described in Yasai's family and in his mother's family laid a foundation for the descriptive data that is reported in the second theme.

Relationship Dynamics

Yasai described closeness in his family as conditional and reciprocal. As he put it, "It depends on the person. Like my mom's adopted parents, my grandparents, I don't really care about them because they don't seem to care about really anything." Mom described relationships in the family as "distant" sharing that in general "I keep people at arms length. I keep very few close people." The exception to this statement was her relationship with Yasai. "I'm close to Yasai but that's pretty much it. I love Yasai's

brother but we never were as close as Yasai and me.” The closeness of her relationship with her son was evident throughout the family interviews and illustrated through statements referring to Yasai as “all I got. He’s my life. ...when anybody hurts him it hurts me so bad.” Another poignant family incident related to these statements occurred when Yasai’s brother told his mother that he had a sexual encounter with Yasai. Mom described her reactions in a very emotional moment.

Anybody that knew me, knew how close we were, and knew if you wanna get to me, do something to him. And Yasai’s brother knew that. And when he told me that about Yasai I said, you could have done anything in the world. I said why did you do this? Anyway, I was so angry I sent his brother to live with his dad.

Yasai also conveyed the importance of his relationship with his mother in similar ways. He shared how disclosing his sexual orientation to her resulted in estrangement, and how concern for his mother’s health brought them back together.

Well, we’re very close. But during the time of my coming out I was detached from her for months. Maybe even a year or two. But ever since her health has been declining I’ve gotten closer to her again. And she’s accepted me for being gay.

The closeness that characterizes Yasai’s relationship with his mother was also evidenced as she expressed concerns and support for her son. Yasai’s mother shared with me that she has “always backed up [her] kids.” This support seemed to be present despite lingering concerns for their well-being. As she moved toward the acceptance that Yasai mentioned in a previous passage, his mom began to associate her son’s experiences with those of other gay youth she had heard about through the news media. Referring to

Matthew Sheppard, she stated, "That stuff happens. You're not going to change rednecks' minds. ...I'm very concerned. I'm not as concerned with "Yasai's partner," because he doesn't flaunt like Yasai does." Another concern that Yasai shared was regarding his mother's worries regarding his partner's HIV status. "I do know that when my mom found out about my partner's status, she was a little wary about him." During the course of the interviews, I observed a great deal of support for Yasai's relationship despite this worry. Several times Mom stated, "I love [Yasai's partner] like a son" and shared that "Everybody teases him and says his boyfriend is too old. I say who cares." During my final interview with Yasai, I asked him what aspects of his participation in this project seemed particularly supportive. He referenced his mother's acceptance saying, "Just parts of it were supportive like how she said she had to learn to accept it and stuff."

Support was also evident in parenting processes as they related to socialization and parental pride. Yasai alluded to lessons he learned from his mother stating that, "I can't stand racism. That's how my mom raised me. I'm against racism and forms of discrimination." Mom also expressed that this was an important value that she tried to impart to her children. At times during the interviews, Yasai's mother took opportunities to give her son feedback and advise him about his life decisions. Drawing from her own personal experiences, she talked about Yasai's desire to be a parent. "He says he wants to adopt. I said, I've been adopted and let me tell you something it's important that you know your roots. That's something I don't have. I don't know my roots." At another point while discussing work and financial well-being, sounding very parental, she stated directly to her son, "Yasai at the age of 20, honey, you get a lot more years of [paying

bills]. Seriously, it's just part of life." Yasai's success in life was of evident importance to his mother as she requested that he relay his achievements on several occasions. On one such occurrence, the following exchange took place between mother and son:

Mom: Did you tell him about the test you took?

Yasai: Oh yeah. A pre-nursing test. ... Yeah. I've taken all my prereq's. I got above the national average. The sciences part will really look good for them because every single section on the science was 100 except chemistry which was like 80 percent.

In response to a similar story, Mom responded, "I'm not proud am I? [laughs]...I'm very proud."

Marginalization

Despite his close relationship with his mother, Yasai experienced incidents of marginalization both within and outside of the family. This theme is indicative of these experiences and not only illustrates the link between Yasai's social environment (including other people as well as institutions) and his family environment, but also is descriptive of the impact of those environments on him as a young person.

Yasai's disclosure of his sexual orientation was really not his disclosure at all. He describes how his mother found out about his sexual orientation based on an incident at his high school.

But mom found out from the school because of a book I had. ...They said it was inappropriate. It was a manga, Japanese comics. It was rated 16+. It was called *Eerie Queerie*. The most it had in it was guys kissing.

The comic Yasai described was discovered by a female peer. "This girl says it's disgusting and blah blah blah and reports it to the dean." School administrators contacted Yasai's mother. Yasai described similar incidents with peers throughout his elementary and secondary school experiences. Describing his middle school experience Yasai shared "I never felt like I really had any friends there. I was a social outcast." Having relocated with his mother to another state, he perceived this school as particularly hostile and unwelcoming.

Well the school...anybody who seemed like they were gay got made fun of. I wasn't, although some people told me I was gay...insisted on it. Later I found out one of the guys really is bi, so I was like, no wonder they knew. The school was terrible. ...they said this one kid was a faggot and posted posters up all over the school while a teacher ran around trying to take them down.

After his coming out experience, Yasai attempted to reconnect with a friend at a former school and disclosed his sexual orientation to him with disappointing results. "And then when I told him I was gay, he was like oh my god, he told his friends oh my god we've been calling him faggot all these years and he really is one."

These experiences at school and similar ones in other settings had an impact on Yasai as a young adolescent. He shared with me how his grades began to slip and the academic success that he had achieved in the seventh grade began to disintegrate in high school. This coincided with the time when he began to acknowledge his sexual orientation. "But then, there comes high school and coming out, and not caring about grades, depression. I basically screwed over my high school [career]." In addition to

these feelings of “not caring,” Yasai described his attempts to hide his secret by isolating himself.

But I never told people for years and years and it just kept eating at me. I felt like I was the only one. I was detached. I didn't feel like I could get really close to people because then they'd know. And I felt the only way out was killing myself. Home life did not offer Yasai much solace during this difficult time at school. He shared with me how he found ways to escape in order to cope.

At home I was not very happy. I probably played the video games because I don't like dealing with what's around me. I like simulation ones because I have control over a life, it may not be mine, but at least I can imagine that I have control over it, you know. Basically, I guess I was detaching myself from the world.

In addition to finding ways to escape, Yasai also seemed to cope through defensiveness and a sense of indignation toward his perceptions of discrimination. Several times Yasai referred to ways in which he could pursue legal action for the violation of his rights. This was the case when he described the incident at school which eventually led to his mother learning of his sexual orientation as well as an incident at work when he was reprimanded for kissing his boyfriend.

I haven't reported [it] but I could have because it violated our antidiscrimination policy which includes sexual orientation. I've seen plenty of employees, customers that are straight kissing each other. If they're allowed to do it and I'm not, that's discrimination and I'll have your ass fired.

A more personal glimpse of Yasai using defensiveness as a coping mechanism came when he shared an experience when a friend rejected him because of his sexual orientation. He engaged in an emotional dialogue with his mother about this young man.

Yasai: But the way I see it is, it doesn't bother me, he's gonna die before he's 30.

Mom: That's not nice Yasai.

Yasai: Well I know, but that's how I deal with life.

Mom: He has [a terminal illness].

Yasai: It's rare that they live past 30, so I'm like, if he doesn't like me, oh well, I won't see him.

This exchange illustrated how experiences of marginalization and oppression as an adolescent shaped Yasai's view of himself and others. Despite these negative encounters and reactions, other social influences were positive.

Positive Social Influences

Marginalization did not encompass Yasai's entire social context. He described several experiences with peers and social organizations that were supportive of him and his family. One friend in high school seemed to help Yasai feel okay with himself and acknowledge his sexual orientation.

Well, he was a really close friend and we got to talking and stuff. I guess because he had gay friends in New York where he came from he could tell. But before that people were accusing me of being gay and I was like no no no I'm not. Then, he helped me come out about it. And literally at school I was like, oh hell, screw this, I'm gay.

He then very happily shared his experience with the first people he told, two friends from his previous middle school. “They’re probably the ones I told first. ... They were like, [we] thought you were. Congratulations. ... [We’re] so happy.”

In addition to his peers, Yasai also found supportive adults in his life. During a discussion with his family about role models, Yasai’s mother mentioned a woman at a local library, with whom Yasai had a supportive relationship during middle school. Yasai referred to her fondly. “We had a library group called the Celts. I almost forgot about it. ... when I was with her and the other people there I actually had fun for once. I wasn’t as detached as I normally was.” He also described a teacher with whom he had a connection. “And that was with my favorite gym teacher. I loved her. She was a lesbian. ... So we did stuff like self defense, hiking and biking, sports medicine.” Yasai’s mother pointed out proudly that through this relationship, her son was able to develop his interests in medicine.

The family had also found a supportive resource within their community. At the close of our first meeting, Yasai, his partner, and his mother discussed attending a PFLAG (Parents & Friends of Lesbians and Gays) meeting together. Yasai’s excitement at his mother joining him and his partner at this meeting was observable. The family engaged in the following exchange with his mother in an attempt to help her feel comfortable.

Yasai: Yeah. And she’s going to be coming to PFLAG this month.

Mom: Well he’s working on that.

Yasai: I asked you last month and you said you would.

Partner: Basically, what everyone did was told about that and anything that's said there you can't repeat a name to anyone of what you've heard. You can talk about what you've talked about but you can't mention any names.

During our follow up interview, I asked Yasai how the meeting went. He confirmed that his mom did attend and enjoyed it, "especially since there's some people there that are her age as well, like a couple couples there, so a lesbian couple there and some other people and one of my friends, his grandmother is there." He enthusiastically told me about a film they watched at the meeting.

We actually got to see a film...about all kinds of different families, there was even a family of Indians from India on there, although they didn't show their faces, but even they were on there and there was even a Mormon family, some woman she was like right up for her son after he came out, she didn't try to tell him, "Try to change" or "I'll help you get rid of it" or anything like that.

Family Transitions

Many instances described by the family during the interviews were framed as family transitions which seemed to serve as milestones within the context of time and place. Some family transitions were related to physical moves. Yasai's mother described how one such transition impacted her relationship with her son.

Well he didn't want to talk to me a lot out there and understandably so. Because I had kicked my husband out and he went straight out to there to live with some old girlfriend....And after about 4 months, by October, I sold my property, I was fed up with my family, so it didn't matter where I went. The bottom line was I was leaving. But I went to [where his stepfather was], so that impacted him.

In the midst of remarriages and relocations, one of the most impactful transitions for the family was Yasai's disclosure of his sexual orientation after his school called his mother. Mom described her immediate reaction stating, "Oh I sat in the corner and rocked. ...[It was] extremely disturbing. It didn't seem to bother me if somebody else was gay but it wasn't in my family yet." This reaction of shock and distress came despite early indications that Yasai may not be heterosexual. She described one of a couple of early sexual encounters with other boys. "I thought this kid from school was a good friend of his, until I found out that they were getting it on right under my nose behind a closed door and I didn't know it!" Yasai shared the early stages of his awareness of his sexual attraction.

I know I had feelings for all the years. The first time I thought it might have been when I was 11. We were talking about porn in school. They had privacy screens on the computers in school, and I looked at naked women and I was like eww. So I looked at naked men I was like ooo.

When confronted with the possibility that her son might be gay, Yasai's mother reacted emotionally toward her husband.

His stepdad used to say to me he's either gay or something wrong with him. I said let me tell you something, this is before I ever knew he was gay, I'd rather my child be gay than dead. But that's because it hit me. It's not like cancer, it's not in your face. You don't really deal with it.

Ultimately, this transition for the family seemed to be continuing as Yasai and his mother redefine their family along with Yasai's partner. Mom alluded to the current status of her adjustment in similar ways throughout the two family interviews.

Like I said I don't have a choice. If I want to be a part of Yasai's life I have to accept it. I don't have to like it, but I have to accept it. And it's not like I'm not going to accept it and not be a part of his life.

Yasai articulated that he felt supported by his mother's comments and her efforts to accept him. Referring to his experiences of support during the interviews he said, "Just parts of it were supportive like how she said she had to learn to accept it and stuff."

Partner & Family

The final theme related to this case embodied Yasai's romantic partnership and the impact of that partnership on his family. While early sexual encounters with other boys proved to be very disturbing to Yasai's mother, as he matured during high school she became more supportive of his relationships. Yasai noticed an increased closeness with his mother as he began to date as an out gay young man. "I think we started getting closer my senior year because that's the first time I actually had a boyfriend. That was "Mr. Unreliable." His mother responded, "Yeah. His stepdad used to yell at me for taking Yasai [to see him]. He didn't have his license at that time and I took him." Yasai's mother spoke very highly of his current partner, who also participated in the interviews. She felt this current partner has a positive impact on Yasai. "I love him [Yasai's partner] like a son. I'm comfortable that Yasai is with him because he is older. The fact that he is [older] is not an issue. But the fact that he is tones Yasai down a little bit." Yasai was very aware of his mother's feelings about his partner. He attributed her trust of him to the fact that he made a very good first impression, helping out at a time when Yasai's mother was ill and in the hospital. "Yeah – one factor may be because the first time she met him, she was in the hospital and he really made a good impression on

her there while my stepdad didn't though." Yasai's partner also shared his fondness for Yasai and his mother. "I think the people in this room are very great. To me, family, it has always been emphasized, especially on my mother's side ...even on my father's side. Now that they are gone, it's not as prevalent."

This grounding in a close family seemed to be something that Yasai's partner extended to Yasai and his mother. In the absence of a family symbol to discuss during the second interview, the conversation turned to traditions. Yasai's partner spoke of his roots in family traditions, some of which Yasai and his mother have become a part.

It's a tradition that we started in my family when my sister got married. What we started doing was taking turns having Christmas in the morning. ... We had breakfast and if we were going to exchange any gifts, we did it. We sat around and talked.

While Yasai's mother stated that, "with all that's happened with my husband, I don't wanna celebrate. He depresses me," she spoke very enthusiastically about spending the holiday with Yasai's partner's family and taking part in their traditions. In addition, the family spoke of spending meal times together and going out to eat when money allowed. During the second interview, Mom brought food to the house and we ate together while we talked. I was able to observe the family's enjoyment of their time together.

The family also spoke of a significant factor within Yasai's relationship with his partner that had a bearing on the family. Yasai's partner being HIV positive affected not only their intimate relationship, but Yasai's mother's perceptions of her son's partnerships. Despite his mother's fondness for and acceptance of his partner now, Yasai

shared his mother's "wariness" about his relationship in the beginning. When I asked what had changed, he stated,

She knows he's a good person and that he wouldn't hurt me and we've constantly told her we use protection and that we're very careful so she trusts us about that now 'cause I mean just like with any illness or anything, she would be worried.

Yasai also shared a bit about how he and his partner managed his illness within the context of their relationship.

We use protection and I'm negative. I go like every 3 months to [the clinic] ...they talked to both of us and said that even though it might not be affecting him right now, he might not have any symptoms and his count may be low that they don't know what's going on with the virus and so it could be mass producing, just waiting for a moment so it's important to know what the virus is exactly doing.

After hearing Yasai describe this process of regular testing for him and monitoring for his partner, I asked him what that was like in terms of being in his relationship.

It's been all right. I mean he's always up front about it. If he meets up with other people – before we went together, he always tells people, it's on his profile that he has HIV; he's not shy about hiding it because he's a pretty honest person.

Yasai added that this partner's honesty helps him feel comfortable because "there's lots of gay people that don't ask and lots of people that don't tell."

Family Development Perspective

Central to the family development perspective as it relates to Yasai's family was the history and pervasiveness of violence in the family system. Repeatedly over the course of the family interviews, Yasai and his mother discussed their perceptions of

family incidents as hostile and abusive. The intergenerational transmission of violence seemed evident in the content information that the family shared. Relaying family history, Mom explained that prior to her adoption she came from a very large family of origin, but all of the children were removed from that home. "My father sexually abused all of us." In the current family system violence pervaded interactional patterns and modes of problem solving. Yasai's brother, who was reported to be abusive toward Yasai, was also protective.

Yasai's brother told this person who said she was going to have Yasai beat up and his brother told her that don't even go there. He said if you touch a hair on my brother's head I'll forget you're a woman. I'll clean your clock lady.

Yasai also reported using threats of physical violence to handle issues and problems. He shared one such incident with me that involved a peer at school. "There was one time in high school, I was singing a song and I hear this guy say fag. I grabbed him and I said how would you like your fucking ass beat by a fag?"

With violent undertones being typical of family interactions, the emotional climate within the family was characterized by pain, cynicism, detachment, and defensiveness. Problem solving methods based in violence and abuse resulted in pain for Yasai's mother. She shared, "it hurt me so bad" when Yasai's stepfather was not present at the hospital during a recent medical emergency. Detachment and defensiveness were poignantly present in Yasai's sentiments about a peer who had rejected him because of his sexual orientation. Taking solace in the fact that this peer would likely die young from a terminal illness, Yasai stated, "that's how I deal with life." These characteristics were also evident when the family discussed socialization around values. When asked

what values he had learned from his relationship with his mother he stated, "I don't know if I learned this from her, but if you don't like people you sure as hell don't respect them." Mom responded to her son, "You have to earn it to get it."

The same characteristics that have been to the detriment of the emotional climate and interactional patterns within the family have also served to disintegrate the family structure and organization. Boundaries within the family system appeared diffuse with shifting alliances and coalitions based on immediate needs for support and defense. A parental subsystem did not seem present in the family structure. Although Mom made attempts to set rules for her children, she expressed that she often felt undermined. Speaking of Yasai's biological father, her first husband, she stated that he "hated confrontation" and "had no rules." According to Mom, this leniency was the precursor to her oldest son's issues with substance abuse. She also stated that her current husband, Yasai's stepdad, "bucked a lot of the values and beliefs I put in these boys." Disagreements over parenting between Yasai's mom and stepdad also emerged. "He says you always mess 'em up. I tell 'em something and you tell 'em something else." While insight into the role and function of rules and structure seemed present in the family, the context of violence and abuse that existed within the system made any level of organization very difficult to achieve.

Over the course of the family interviews, communication was an observable relational process. Reviewing the researcher's reflexive journal, after the first interview I noted that "the family seemed reluctant to discuss the topic at hand. Frequently when asked about aspects of relationships, Yasai and his mother would deflect the question by sharing a negative aspect of their family experience." Typically these experiences were

related to Yasai's brother or his stepfather. This pattern of communication continued throughout the interviews although abated somewhat as the family became more familiar and seemingly comfortable with the interview process. Reflecting on observations of the family dynamics, in the absence of something else, Yasai and his mother seemed to bond over these shared experiences. Frequently their expressions of feeling toward and about one another were relayed to me directly, but when speaking of their relationships and interactions with other family members, they were able to interact in supportive ways with each other.

The relationship between Yasai and his mother served as an exception to the typical relational patterns that characterized the family system in several ways. Observing their interactions provided a glimpse into a strong bond even if feelings around that bond weren't always expressed. When asked to describe their current relationship, Yasai stated, "We're pretty close," to which his mother responded "We cool ain't we baby. I always call him baby [laughs]." Yasai's mom also shared repeatedly how important her relationship with her son was to her. Her desire to be close with her son served as a motivator to accept him. "I can't change it. That's pretty much it in nutshell. I can't change it. I can accept it or don't accept it and if I don't accept it I can't be close to Yasai." Expressions of acceptance like this were important to Yasai, as were his feelings of connectedness to family. The role of his partner in offering opportunities for these connections and enhancing feelings of closeness was also an important dynamic that was both observed and expressed.

Queer Theory Critique

A queer perspective on the data obtained from Yasai's family can certainly begin with an analysis of the influence of his partner. Yasai's same-sex partnership seemed to bring a sense of stability to Yasai and his mother, both individually and collectively. This sense of stability would seem to disturb the dominant discourse regarding same-sex couples and gay families. Alluding to this sense of stability, Yasai's mother mentioned several times that his partner "tones Yasai down a little bit." She tied this notion of being toned down to what she described as "flaunting" his sexuality, a term which Yasai defined as acting "purposefully feminine just to be joking." Yasai's mother indicated that her son's "flaunting" caused her concern for Yasai's well-being and safety, and attributed this behavior to Yasai's youth. She felt his older, more mature partner somehow balanced out these qualities. Here, Yasai's mother's rationale can be deconstructed in several ways. A queer perspective requires us to look for aspects of heterosexist discourse in her thinking. While one can easily draw a conclusion that there is a certain level of discomfort for her when her son "flaunts" or acts outwardly feminine or gay, she constructed her motivations in a very different way, perhaps more grounded in attachment and protection. Yasai's mother seemed keenly aware of homophobia and harassment and violence that can accompany it. She has experienced this within her own family. Therefore, her disdain for Yasai's feminine persona could be critiqued as inherently heterosexist and homophobic, or as a protective factor against these phenomena in her family and the culture at large. Understanding which of these critiques is valid might lie within the examination of how the family collectively made sense of the

relationship between sexuality and gender and how these constructs operated in the family system.

At the end of our second family interview, Yasai discussed his interest in drag. During a tour of his and his partner's home following first interview, I had noticed a wig on top of Yasai's dresser. This aspect of gender performance was not mentioned prior to the end of our time together that evening. Prior to leaving their home after our second interview session, however, Yasai shared photographs that he had taken in full drag and explained that he was preparing for his "debut." He explained that, "I'm actually going to start doing it, I haven't really done it yet, but I've taken pictures and I've tried to get ready because I don't want to look like a broad shouldered tranny walking down the street." As might be expected from our discussions regarding Yasai "flaunting" his sexuality, his mother's reaction to her son's interest was less than positive. During my follow up interview I asked Yasai about his motivation. He responded, "Well I do it because it's like entertainment, I like making people laugh and I've been telling my mom that a drag queen, it's just for entertaining people." Despite the entertainment value, there was some indication in the data that Yasai associated being gay with femininity. At one point in our discussions he referred to the sound and tone of his voice. "I told people if I had known what my voice sounded like before I got a microphone for my computer, I was like, I'm freakin' gay. It's more feminine than I thought. ...I sound like a woman!"

When asked about early clues regarding Yasai's sexuality, he immediately mentioned playing with dolls when he was young, which his mother interpreted as a gendered clue. She replied, "I don't have a problem with that. It's like, they had dishes. What's wrong with little kids having dishes? They might not get married and they might

need to know how to cook.” A queer perspective would illuminate the heterosexual expectations inherent in these statements, suggesting that Mom’s denial of socially constructed female qualities in her son is inherent in her making meaning of him in a heterosexual frame. Yasai, on the other hand, consistently queered his family by pushing the envelope regarding gender lines and their relationship to sexuality.

Lastly, a support group for gay individuals and their families seemed to have served as a catalyst to bring Yasai’s family together. What a violent and abusive family context had worn away, the local PFLAG chapter seemed to provide a space, inherently a queer space, for this family to reunite. Yasai and his partner shared that they first went to a PFLAG meeting together as friends. As a romantic couple they have continued to attend and during our second interview Yasai was very excited to share that “We always go to PFLAG and now sissy [his partner’s sister] and my mom are going to join too.” As Yasai spoke about the meetings, his enjoyment of them was apparent, particularly in that they seemed to offer him a foundation of positive connections with others. He was very interested for his mother to be a part of that along with him and his partner. In a family where disconnection and estrangement were evident, a queer forum seemed to offer an opportunity for connection and healing.

Summary & Reflections

Yasai and his family gave me the opportunity to see their lives together in a candid and sincere way. Yasai’s enthusiasm to participate in this study made an impression on me from his initial contact, when I had the sense that he had a story to tell. The family offers an illustration of what might be considered less than ideal functioning from a family development perspective. A queer perspective, however, reveals some

adaptive processes that seem protective and affirming in their constructions of lived experiences. Yasai's family seems to be a portrait of resilience for gay youth in their families. Coming from the degenerating effects of dominant cultural stress, queer culture has offered the family a voice and a space to forge renewed relationships.

Tatiana's Family

This is not my life, this is your life. I'm here to help you. I'm here to give you guidance.

But it's not my existence. This is your existence. (Tatiana's Mom)

Introduction

I met Tatiana's family at her college apartment. Her parents were visiting her for the weekend in order to participate in some events that were sponsored by the campus gay student group. During our first meeting we sat in her living room and I got to know Tatiana, her mother, and her father as they jovially shared with me the highlights of the Mardi Gras celebration they had attended the night before on campus. Over the time we spent together, I came to know the laughter and joking that I first encountered to be indicative of their family interactions. I found them to be fun or to be serious depending on the topic and context of discussion. While they were very willing to participate in this project, frequently I got the sense that they were wondering, "What's the big deal?" This sentiment was conveyed in statements like "We're analyzing stuff that we just naturally did," suggesting that I was asking them to think about and discuss those aspects of their family that came just as one would expect. This attitude was present in their general approach to family which was open and accepting. As the within case analysis indicates, Tatiana's family was a very cohesive unit. The family symbol they presented during the

second interview was a Candy Land game, which they described as a tool to facilitate communication and time spent together.

Tatiana, a 21 year old college student, described her family as Caucasian and upper middle class. She had disclosed her sexual orientation, which she identified as bisexual, five years prior, at the age of sixteen.

Themes

Five central themes were distilled from the interview, observation, and artifact data obtained from Tatiana's family. *Family Characteristics* represents family discussions about origins, roles, and family structure. The second theme, *Relationship Dynamics*, was quite prevalent in the data and highly characterized by close relationships and cohesion. *Social Influences* comprises experiences with social contexts (e.g. community and peers) as well as social institutions (e.g. schools, organized religion, etc.). The final two themes, *Natural Progression* and *Coming Out*, relate to elements of the family lifecycle and are indicative of the way the family has changed and grown over the years.

Family Characteristics

When asked to describe their family, Tatiana's parents began to lay a foundation for our discussion by characterizing their own family of origin experiences. Both parents agreed that their goal in raising Tatiana was to do things differently than what they had experienced. Mom, who was adopted, shared that this goal was not always a conscious intent but a goal nonetheless.

I had a crappy childhood and I was determined when I had a child to do things extremely different and to maintain an entirely different relationship than I dealt

with. So I strived for that subconsciously or whatever it may be. But I was determined it was going to be different and better.

Dad concurred with this statement, stating that “with my own experiences, I wanted to do the same thing [be different and better].” Tatiana’s mom pointed out communication as a specific aspect of her relationship with her daughter that she intentionally wanted to develop.

Because I know in taking from my own experiences, your parents always tell you, oh tell us everything, blah, blah, blah. And the first time you open up, you get grounded for two months and you get everything taken away from you. And you’re like, why did I do that? That was ridiculous! [laughter] So I always was determined not to be that way.

This statement, shared with some humor, was pivotal in characterizing the manner in which the family related to one another. Communication served as a foundation for relational processes in Tatiana’s family and permeated all aspects of those processes.

Tatiana suggested that being an only child defined the structure of her family and the way that she communicated with her parents. “I tell my parents everything pretty much. [I’m an] only child so you know we have to be that way.” With this groundwork for relationships in place, Mom described the structure of the family in more detail. In her role as a parent, she contended that it was her responsibility to intentionally create structure. “Well I think to make it happen; I think it’s a matter, as a parent, of how you rear your child in setting forth rules in the household.” Mom also shared how rules were not arbitrary family edicts, but based on “structure and importance.” If a rule was in place, it was intentional in its purpose and compliance was the expectation.

She's never had a lot of rules imparted on her, especially when you get to the driving age, and things of that nature, when you're out on your own. But the rules you did have you better follow. You have a curfew time. You better have your cell phone at all times. Call me if you're going to miss that curfew time. And then it's not going to be a problem. Let me know where you are.

When a rule was broken, Tatiana's parents valued honesty and backed up their beliefs about child rearing to let their daughter know that she could come to either of her parents and communicate with candor and truthfulness. In Tatiana's family deceit equaled punishment.

Her mother stated "if you lie to me, if you are purposefully deceitful, then you're going to be punished and then you're going to deal with it in that fashion." Her mother went on to share that she felt Tatiana learned how to communicate in the family from this approach to rules and punishment.

So I think that along the way, as she grew up, she realized, I can tell them anything and I'm not going to get in trouble for it. So as that progressed through her life and she didn't get into trouble for it, then it was something to be dealt with and worked out, she sat down and we worked it out and we talked about it whatever the case may be. It makes you, I think, more comfortable with being able to talk to your parents. And not be judgmental.

Being non-judgmental was also an important value in Tatiana's family. This value not only served as a framework for relationships, but also informed the way in which the family was structured and members interacted. Mom said to her daughter,

That's the one thing that I've never ever wanted to be is judgmental in any way shape or form. Because this is not my life, this is your life. I'm here to help you. I'm here to give you guidance. But it's not my existence. This is your existence. I've already been 21, 18, 16, whatever the case may be.

In addition to structure, roles of different family members also contributed to the internal context of Tatiana's family. Through describing her views of family rules and communication, Tatiana's mom implied a certain hierarchy, in which the parents are in charge of the family. Tatiana's father delineated family roles not only by function, but also by gender. He labeled his role as the family peacekeeper.

As you have relationships like this, you have the person who tries to be the peacekeeper and that was my role. I TRY to be the peace keeper. But what I've got here are two very strong headed, strong willed women. [laughter] As any male in any sort of relationship has that, whether it's dealing with a wife and a daughter or a wife and a mother or a sister, you try, but not only does it not work out so well a lot of times it blows up in your face. [laughter]

The family laughed together as they discussed this topic, but no one disputed the manner in which Dad described his role. Throughout the interview I could sense and observe the strength of intellect, voice, and conviction that Tatiana and her mother possessed. From his comments, her father could obviously recognize these qualities as well.

Relationship Dynamics

The family shared one instance in particular that seemed to illustrate not only family roles, but also the way in which members of the family interacted within those

roles. Mom described a period of time when her daughter first went away to college in which family conflict became more typical at home.

It was like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde almost. We'd go pick her up for a weekend to bring her home.... And the first 24 hours you're fine; and then the next 24 hours you get on your high horse and you think you're all that. It was like no no, it's time for you to go back to school.

Conflict came to a head at Thanksgiving break during Tatiana's first semester. Mom described reaching her breaking point with her husband and daughter while preparing dinner. "So I was just like screw it. I'm done. I don't need either of you. I'll go to my bedroom too and just let the turkey burn. I don't give a damn." Mom went on to say that the family was reconciled before Tatiana returned to school, but also reflected about her daughter and that time of her daughter's life.

I didn't think we had changed, and maybe in your eyes we had some. But it was more I really think her [Tatiana] just finding her own way at that time. And once she realized, nothing is different, it's just that I don't live in my room any more, I'm two and half hours away. My relationship is the same. My parents aren't treating me differently. Nothing is out of the ordinary. Why am I doing this? And it's just finding your own place.

Mother, father, and daughter agreed that this incident was "in the past" and that the family had "moved on." Their discussion of this incident does illustrate the thoughtful and intentional approach to parenting that was previously discussed.

Closeness in the family was also constructed as an intentional goal and everyone agreed that they were “a really close knit family.” Referring to this notion of being “close knit,” Tatiana’s mother shared that

We’ve always strived to maintain that, especially all throughout her life because she is an only child. To make sure that we always had that bond and that connection and that it carried through into adulthood so that she always felt like she had someone there for her.

Feeling close to one another is something that motivated Dad because of his experiences in his family of origin. “Because of that disconnect in my own personal family, I wanted to strive to make sure that our relationship between the three of us was a good solid healthy relationship.” Even in times of conflict, as previously described, the stability of the family system as a constant in terms of safety and support was maintained. Mom described her stance about disagreements and rough family times: “I’m still here for you. But I understand you need to grow and we’ll get past this. And we did.” Closeness in the family seemed rooted in emotional ties to one another. Dad described in a very moving way how he felt about “the daughter.”

I make no bones about the fact that I do miss the daughter. I don’t hide the fact that I do love my daughter a lot. I miss her when she’s not around... the weekends we come down and spend with her, I relish them all the much more.

When she comes home I will make sure that I don’t work late as much as I possibly can and get to see and visit her and again, just be around her...

Mom clarified the feelings Dad expressed for Tatiana, but that she expressed them differently.

I think the dynamic is just a little different because of the way our emotions are – it's like I don't love or miss the daughter any less than he does, but I deal with it differently. She's an adult. If I don't let go, it's going to tear me up and there's no point in that. She has to go out on her own, it's her time, let her be an adult.

She went on to describe the family's closeness and their expressions of closeness within the context of Tatiana's stage of life and the desire to empower her to excel.

I think he kind of – if you want to call it “wearing it on your sleeve more.”

Whereas I will just – I mean I feel that way, but I keep it in more because I don't want her to feel at all any form of guilt or anything like that cause you're away or you're going here or you're going there. I want you to do these things, these are awesome things, do them and be happy about them. I knew one day you'd grow up and move out.

Communication in Tatiana's family seemed very open and honest, and I was able to observe very candid conversations among all family members over the course of the two family interviews. Tatiana's mother set the tone for communication in the family. “What I tried to impart to Tatiana, was you need to tell us, you need to share. If something happens we'll work it out, we'll work through it.” This mantra around communication had implications for Tatiana disclosing her sexual orientation to her parents. Tatiana drew a contrast between her experiences with disclosure and those of her friends.

And it opens a lot of communication. I can sit here and I can talk about it. I have friends whose parents are okay with their child being gay, but gay isn't okay.

Like my friend [name omitted], his mom loves him and is okay with it, but she

doesn't want to hear about it, she doesn't want to know. So I think the fact that my parents are proponents for the fact that it should be okay is nice, because then you can open that line of communication in terms of what I'm feeling what I'm thinking when I see things in the news, like I can talk about it. So I like that dimension.

Unlike the experiences of her friends, as she described them, communication processes in Tatiana's family were tempered with supportive process, unconditional positive regard, and a non-judgmental stance. Tatiana's mother very poignantly expressed these ideals when she talked about having a daughter who was not heterosexual.

See, love for your children for me is unconditional and I can't understand the parents, and she has the stories of the friends that she's told us and you hear them. You tell your mom or dad you're gay. [gasp] Pack your stuff and get out! What happened to five minutes before that conversation you loved me for who I was. What changed now? I haven't changed. I'm the same person. Just because I love or care for a different person than you would. Who cares? I just can't get beyond that. Your child is your child is your child, no matter what. Period.

Reflecting on the supportive stance that her mother describes, Tatiana states that, "It's like a weight off your shoulders to know that you're not carrying around the fact that, oh, my parents hate me because I'm gay." Her peers who said they don't care what their parents thought seemed to perplex Tatiana. She stated, "Like, that's your parents and that's the one source of love you're supposed to have your whole life, when no one else is there." Given the way in which support and closeness are communicated to her, Tatiana

seemed to understand that the “one source of love” that she spoke of will be there for her lifetime.

These qualities have also created an environment in the family where learning can take place from parent to child as well as child to parent. Lessons around family functioning and family dynamics were inherent in many of the topics we discussed during the family interviews. Despite the closeness they felt, both parents seemed to let Tatiana have the independence to employ those lessons she had learned within her family system. Her father described this notion as it related to having a daughter in college.

You teach them the best way you can, you tell them the best way you can, and at 18, when they go away to college, you send them out into the world, and you just hope that whatever you’ve taught them and told them they retain at least some of that. [laughter]

Tatiana added that in addition to learning from her parents, she has socialized them around issues of being gay and gay culture. Some of this socialization occurred as part of the coming out process in the family. “So for me to come out and say I liked women, it was like, okay, now she likes women. And it was hard for me to explain I like women and men.” She expands on this statement and explains what it was like for her to try to help her parents understand as she was still making meaning for herself. As was typical of the family, the process was engaged in with humor.

And so, I actually remember laughing a lot because it was more just funny trying to explain to them. Especially for me because this is my first girlfriend so I don’t even know what it means to be bi. Like, I’m like what does this mean that I like a girl? And then I’m still questioning do I like guys? And so it was really hard to

explain it when I don't even know what I'm explaining. Because at this point I've only been an ally of gay rights, so I'm still just like, okay, I like women; I actually just like my best friend. Whatever. So it was a funny situation I thought. And it was kind of awkward to try to explain that there are people who like both and we're here and here I am.

During the course of conversation of this topic, Mom disagreed with her daughter, suggesting that she didn't feel she learned a great deal about gay culture from her daughter. Tatiana contended that "I feel like you have learned some culture because you ask questions about certain things. ...I've explained what it means when you dress butch and a butch dates a fem. You've learned these things. That's kind of culture." Mom agreed but also pointed out that "it's also not like I grew up in a closet and had no idea about butch and gay and everything else." Dad concurred that he had exposure to gay people, but also stated that he had learned from his daughter.

Because I have had gay friends, but not really close gay friends. Spending time with the gay people at the event last night that's just one aspect of lots of things we've done since Tatiana's coming out; and getting to know them up close and personal. So we have learned.

As the family discussed the ways in which they learned from each other through this exchange, I was able to observe these socialization processes taking place in that moment. The discourse relayed above illustrated for me how ideas are exchanged and debated within the family, with the outcome being that both parents and daughter learned something about each other.

Social Influences

Part of the discussion in which the family engaged around learning culture was a discussion of gay rights in the U.S. Tatiana shared that she had been a long time gay advocate before she began to understand her own sexuality. At one point Mom stated that the daughter had really educated her “more along the [gay] rights path and more in the political arena of what goes on....” The family also discussed social influences as they related to other people in public situations as well as experiences with school and organized religion.

In terms of the family’s personal experiences with homophobia and discrimination in external social contexts, Mom stated that she hadn’t really experienced a great deal of either. “I mean sometimes you get the weird look, you know, from people and you know what they’re thinking inside, but again I could care less.” Tatiana echoed her mother’s experiences and sentiments.

I mean honestly you just get stared at, I mean besides staring, people don’t have the balls to say anything half the time anyways so I personally have not been discriminated against outwardly anywhere – besides being stared at. I guess some people consider being stared at discrimination, but-

In addition, Tatiana shared that she had felt relatively safe in public and on campus. “I never feel fearful. I never do. I mean there’s time that you feel awkward and you’re just like, okay, you can stop staring.” While not constructed as discrimination, Tatiana did relay experiences of being harassed in school settings. She spoke of “being made fun of a lot in middle school.” “Everyone’s so freaking immature, they can’t handle it. And I remember getting made fun of so many times.” Mom also recalled this difficult time.

“And I remember the trauma that whatever was being said [had caused]; the crying, the situations.”

Organized religion also had an impact on the family system both historically and at specific points in time during Tatiana’s adolescence. Dad described the family’s current religious ideologies as more spiritual. “Yeah, we do have, I guess, some sort of spirituality, but we’re not organized religion by any stretch of the imagination.” Mom characterized her experience with religion in the following way:

Raised Catholic. That was enough. Catholic school 8 years, ... you know, turned 18, see ya. I can do whatever; make my own choices, thank you very much. And that was the end of organized religion. Unfortunately it kind of ruined the religious aspect thoughts of my life. It did. And I have nothing to do with organized religion at all. I feel there’s something else, I feel to be a spiritual type person that there is something else no matter what it might be, but no I’m not going to go sit in a church and pray for an hour and kneel, stand, sit.

Drawing a comparison with her parents, Tatiana shared that “they’re a little more religious, spiritual than I am, but I consider myself agnostic so as you know we’re still on the fence and don’t believe anything.” She described her exploration of religion beginning at an early age. “I started questioning what I believed in religious wise way before I even thought about the facts of life, that I liked girls. So I made my decision personally way before I realized that I was gay or whatever.” Tatiana’s mother recalled a time when her daughter became very interested in being baptized, which she attributed to the influence of a peer. “You didn’t say her name, but I knew it was her because that’s who you were hanging out with. They’re very religious, our next door neighbors.” This

interest prompted mom and daughter to have a conversation about religion. Mom shared what she told Tatiana at that time. “We had the conversation, it’s like why do you think if God is a loving God, a caring God and respects all living beings, [not] having some water thrown on your head isn’t going to let you into heaven.” Mom went on to explain that the goal of her talks with Tatiana about this topic were to “enlighten her to other thoughts.”

Just don’t take what your neighbor is saying because she’s embedded in the church and follow that. Think about it. Think about what your saying, even outside of baptism, think about religion as a whole, what is being said, what is coming across to you. Does it make logical sense to you in your mind? If it does, then follow it. If it doesn’t, then question it.

This advice seemed to transcend the influence of religion on Tatiana and her family and be more indicative of the family’s approach to life in general.

Natural Progression

Consistently throughout the interview process I heard from Tatiana and her parents that their progression as a family unit occurred without much thought or reflection. The general sense they conveyed to me was that although they were very intentional about building their relationships, that intentionality came naturally as a result of the parents’ common beliefs and values. The development of the family system over time was portrayed as seamless and almost flawless. At the beginning of the first interview with the family, Tatiana’s father hesitated in his response to a topic of conversation, stating that, “We’ve never really had to actually analyze it before. It just

happened and it happened so well.” He expanded on how “it happened so well” by describing how they took decisions and life events in stride.

But, again, not really analyzing it, it was, again, the natural progression of our and more specifically her life. Okay, we accepted her when she wanted to play basketball and when she wanted to play guitar and when she wanted to date girls; whatever the next thing was in her life. The flag team, guard, you know whatever she wanted to do.

Tatiana’s dad expressed this notion of just living life and not analyzing that process several times throughout the interview, as if he were trying to make a point with a depth that was difficult to express. Eventually, he seemed to get at the root of what’s important to the family’s cohesion and stability as he spoke of family change.

I don’t think the core values have changed at all whatsoever. Maybe something, some of the values maybe not so, that aren’t as deep rooted-...Just how times change, how things change, you maybe look at things a little different, but making sure you love your child and give them everything – the deep rooted sense of family, I don’t think changes.

By constructing family as a core value, Tatiana’s father seemed to suggest that events that have and will occur over the course of the family lifecycle are simply part of the process, not the “end all be all” of the family, but rather the essence of what the family is and will become.

The future of the family comprised another component of the current theme. Tatiana mentioned messages regarding her future that she received from her parents as a young girl and how she made meaning of them.

I remember we had a conversation once about how my parents were not happy if I were to marry someone in the military. And I remember being like well I wonder if this is on the same level, are they going to be dissatisfied? You know what I mean? You know, as much as I am still a tomboy, I still have that girly factor. It's kind of like, oh, my daughter's going to date women. And from my mom I thought she'd be like, oh, no cute man with cute little children.

Tatiana's mother, however, expressed on several occasions that her desire is that Tatiana's future be her own. Mom relayed a story about a friend who, after finding out that Tatiana was dating girls, exclaimed, "you're going to miss out on grandchildren." Tatiana's mother shared her response which she stated quite emphatically. "I looked at her and said to my friend, this is not my life. If she chooses to have children she can adopt children. There are other ways to have children. This is not my life. I'm not living through her." After sharing this story, Mom looked at her daughter and said, "You do what you do. If you never have children, if you never adopt, so be it. I didn't have you to have grandchildren. If it ended here with our family line, then that's where it ends. And so be it." When asked about the family in the future, although there were discussions of geographic distance and post college careers, Tatiana's mom summed up her vision, stating that, "I mean I just don't see it changing all that much, I really don't. No matter what she does, she'll always be accepted."

Coming Out

As mentioned previously, Tatiana's father constructed her coming out as just part of the natural progression and development of the family system. Her parents spoke of

early clues that led them to believe that their daughter might not be heterosexual. One such clue was constructed around gendered appearance as Tatiana's mother described it.

But we suspected. I don't know how you felt internally. We suspected in middle school because she went through a phase...Not just tomboy, but out and out butch. Butching it to its limit. At that point I remember saying to you and at some point it's like, yeah, she's going to be a little different. ...It was just a matter of time to see what happened. Was it just an extreme phase in middle school or was it going to progress into a different lifestyle as she grew up. It was just a matter of waiting to see.

With an idea that Tatiana might "be a little different," her parents recalled a night when they realized she was on a date with another girl. "I remember it distinctly...all you said was I'm going out with my friend, we were like whatever, so you went out came back in, your friend had a skirt on...and you had gone on your first dinner date." This particular incident was Tatiana's mother's story of her coming out experience. Tatiana insisted it happened differently.

Prior to coming out, Tatiana shared that she felt some apprehension about telling her parents. "As much as I trust them and I know them, there's still always in the back of your mind no matter what you say, you still never know how they're going to react." While feeling a bit apprehensive, Tatiana was quick to clarify that "I wasn't terrified, I was just kind of nervous. It wasn't like my whole life was coming to an end and I'd lay awake at night and think how am I going to tell my parents I'm gay?" According to Tatiana, her disclosure came at the dinner table after her mother asked her about her boyfriend.

So my thought of how it happened, how I remember it is we were at dinner and I finally was freaking out about telling them, and mom asked about how my boyfriend was. And I was like oh, god dammit. And I was like, well I'm not dating him, I'm dating [a girl]. And they were just like oh. And who was it, one of you was like, so does that mean you're...a lesbian?

During our follow up interview when asked about the discrepancies between her parents' and her coming out stories, Tatiana stated, "I don't think their story's as good."

In addition to the early clues and ultimate disclosure to her family, Tatiana shared how she began to identify her sexuality and how that process of identification developed over time. She described herself as "tomboyish" and articulated that as a girl she was able to move easily between stereotypical male activities and stereotypical female activities.

I went outside and played football with dad and then I'd come in and go prom shopping with mom, dress shopping. And it never seemed like weird to me to do that. So I don't really know. I never actually like felt like oh I feel so awkward in my family because I'm such a tomboy or I feel so awkward because I'm gonna, when I got older, I'm gonna go hang out with my girlfriend. I never felt like I'm scared. It just felt natural. I never felt anything weird. I never felt like I'm being someone different.

This statement led me to ask Tatiana if she ever felt like she needed to hide who she was in her family, to which she replied immediately and vehemently, "No! Oh no!."

We'd always go out and play outside. Play baseball, play football. There was no like I don't want to tell them, I'm so tomboyish, and wanna go play sports. I

never hid the fact. Before I started dating my first girlfriend and realized I liked her, I was huge into gay rights at that point. And they knew about it. I didn't hide it. I would always talk about how certain things angered me in terms anti-gay remarks and stuff. So I never hid anything that I've always been a proponent for. Tatiana's father broached the issue of labeling and discussed Tatiana's resistance to assuming a label when she was younger. "I remember in that same conversation the words out of her mouth were something along the lines of I just like [her], I don't want to be labeled as a lesbian." Tatiana reiterated what her father said and mentioned that it has not been until recently that she has accepted a label and referred to herself as "bi." She shared that her feelings about being labeled weren't necessarily something she would discuss with her parents. "I think for me that was all a self discovery thing and that was me accepting a social label which I still, you know, that's just personal stuff that I don't really talk about with you all." Tatiana further delineated the line between her personal development and the impact of her family.

Everything for that was just all personal for me. Like, coming out and saying I like women was family related, but then after that the discovery that I like women and men permanently, that was all self discovery and that was all personal and internal.

Family Development Perspective

Applying a family development lens to the case of Tatiana's family reveals generally supportive relational processes. The family as a whole demonstrated a high degree of insight and awareness of how they functioned and related to one another. Although Dad described the development of the family as a "natural progression," this

progression had an intentional and purposeful foundation. Both parents were able to reflect on their own experiences as children and adolescents and make some important decisions about how they would raise their daughter. They seemed to start with a sense of how they wanted their family to work and set out to make that vision a reality. Although Tatiana's parents didn't mention any formal discussion of child rearing between them, they did seem to be aligned in the roles as parents, with shared values and a collaborative approach. At one point Dad discussed how parenting was shared and integrated with the job responsibilities in a dual career household. "The way my work schedule was, I was involved with most of her in school and after school activities in one way shape or form." This and other comments shared throughout the family interviews suggested that parenting was collaborative and both parents had close relationships with Tatiana.

Of all the relational processes that were present in the data, closeness seemed to permeate all aspects of the family's relationships and closely tie emotion, organization, and interaction together. The emotional climate of the family was broad in terms of range and feeling. Dad in particular was able to articulate strong feelings of caring and attachment to his daughter during the interviews. Mom's feelings seemed to be conveyed more strongly through actions and expressions of concerns. "The only thing that I ever have concern about is her safety. Because there are so many people that are anti-gay and that is my biggest concern every day, is that something happens because of that." Overall, the family was very optimistic and a positive mood pervaded their discussions of their past, present, and future.

In addition to emotional expressions, interactions were also characterized by humor and open communication. Dad described the family's humor as "off beat," a quality that was illustrated throughout the family's dialogue, such as when they referred to elderly relatives as "reaching the heaven age" or when after Tatiana discussed the development of her sexual orientation, Dad in a very puzzled tone asked, "You like guys too?" Laughter was frequent as the family interacted and emotional expression was most often light hearted. After a particularly touching moment of dialogue, the family quickly returned to a more typical interaction pattern when Mom said to Tatiana, "Sorry, sorry I love you. What can I say? Somebody has to."

Openness, honesty, and safety seemed to be qualities that typified communication patterns in the family. Both of Tatiana's parents discussed their desire for the daughter to be able to talk openly about any issue or concern. This was an intentional and agreed upon dynamic that her parents set out to create in the family. Suggesting that they achieved this goal, at several points during our talks Tatiana mentioned that she can tell her parents "pretty much everything." While communication was open with her parents, Tatiana did express that some aspects of her life were personal and private. Observations of interactions between family members gave the impression that opinions and views could be expressed in the family without fear of repercussions. As with the circumstances around her disclosing her desire to "date girls," Tatiana would debate and negotiate with her parents regarding differences of opinion or recollection. According to the family, communication also occurred frequently. "I mean we talk now on the phone except when she's in class all day. We'll talk three, four times a day. It can range from a

two minute conversation to an hour and a half.” Dad jokingly shared that they got a weekly update on the latest “lesbian drama.”

Finally, structure around relationships and roles was high in the family. This level of organization seemed in opposition to the otherwise laid back and comfortable ways in which the family engaged. As with many aspects of their lives together, the family seemed to have created balance in this realm. Rules were apparent and enforced. Those rules however were few and based on importance. Although very close as a family, boundaries were evident and subsystems were present and well formed. In addition to the parental subsystem, which seemed cohesive and well defined, definite unique nuances were apparent in the relationships Tatiana had with each of her parents. The family discussed one such nuance.

Tatiana: Dad and I never talk on the phone...it’s ridiculous trying to talk to him on the phone.

Mom: He’s just not a phone talker.

Tatiana: But when they come down to visit, it’s like, dad and I – we’ll talk like all the time. Dad follows me around the house and mom’s doing whatever. So when we hang out we usually talk more.

Based on this discussion, Mom pointed out that “the dynamic is just a little different because of the way our emotions are.” As an observer, my broader construction was that differences in Tatiana’s family were simply respected.

Queer Theory Critique

Certainly those aspects of gender and identity that are evident in the data obtained from Tatiana’s family offer fertile ground for queer critique. By accounts in the data,

Tatiana has played with aspects of gender and sexuality throughout her adolescence and young adult life. One of the early clues her parents discussed was a period of time during middle school when she was “butching it to the max,” which was based on their daughter portraying a stereotypical masculine appearance. While this “phase” as her mother described it seemed to be perceived as extreme, throughout her adolescent years Tatiana seemed able to drift between socially gendered activities. She spoke of playing sports outside with her dad and then coming in to go shopping with her mom. Negotiating between the “tomboy” and the “girlie factor” seemed to be a salient process for Tatiana. Although her parents didn’t present any difficulty with their daughter’s appearance or behaviors, Tatiana seemed to contemplate how she would explain her preferences to others. Given this contemplation, the safety of her family seemed to serve as a testing ground for her to experiment with different ways to not only perform gender but also identify sexuality.

The aspects of changeable gendered appearance and performance in the data epitomize the essence of queer critiques of identity. Tatiana’s father talked about her rejection of labels as a young adolescent. Tatiana described this as developmental.

When I liked a girl and we dated, the whole time I was like I don’t consider myself bi right now. Because I never had a crush on a girl before and even when we dated I didn’t have a crush on another girl. It wasn’t until I dated my current girlfriend now that I was finally like, okay, well maybe I do like other girls. Because I dated guys for close to 3-4 years after we broke up without even considering dating another girl. So for me to consider myself bi, that’s a new thing. That’s within the past 2 years. That’s a development thing.

Tatiana went on to add, “I think for me that was all a self discovery thing and that was me accepting a social label which I still, you know, that’s just personal stuff....” Here Tatiana described how understanding her self as bisexual is still merely accepting a “social label” or one way of constructing her behaviors and appearance in relation to the dominant social landscape. These descriptions and interpretations ultimately illustrated the concept of identity as a dynamic fluid process rather than a static and socially branded product. Identity for Tatiana is in the identifying, not a result of it. This notion of identity as process that is exemplified in Tatiana’s experience is inherently queer. Her parents’ worldview as it informed their understanding of their daughter seemed to support this notion, suggesting that the family could be constructed as existing and relating in a queered system. Perhaps the family’s core of cohesion, their ability to balance openness and boundaries, allowed the queerness of their daughter to become incorporated more fully into the system.

Despite the potential for queering within Tatiana’s family, the pull of the dominant culture was still present. Indications of this pull in the data were subtle but could not be ignored in the context of a queer critique. Despite her awareness and experience with her family’s openness, Tatiana still expressed apprehension about disclosing to them. “I was apprehensive I think because I remember we had conversations about, as lame as this is, I remember we had a conversation once about how my parents were not happy if I were to marry someone in the military.” This statement suggests that at least at one time there were heterosexual expectations operating in the family. In addition, labeling their daughter was a natural reaction to Tatiana’s initial disclosure. As she shared her version of her coming out story, she stated, “And

who was it, one of you was like, so does that mean you're...a lesbian? [laughter] Then it was the issue of trying to explain to them what bi meant and what it meant to be bi."

Over time the process of making meaning continued to draw Tatiana's parents in this same direction. As we spoke about her rejection of labels, Tatiana's Mom stated, "We would ask you occasionally. And even in a joking way as years would go by I would say, okay, are you going to admit that you're a lesbian now? Come on." The pull to fit Tatiana into a category seemed to operate and be persistent in the family system over time.

The reaction of Tatiana's parents to her disclosing her interest in "dating a girl" also offered an opportunity for deconstruction. "I was like, well I'm not dating him, I'm dating [name omitted]. And they were just like oh." Such a laissez-faire response to a disclosure that came with some trepidation begs the question of what are supportive processes within families of gay youth. An open and honest atmosphere that values closeness and communication certainly seemed supportive and the clues that Tatiana had offered her parents may have prepared them for this conversation. In what ways does reacting to a queer youth's disclosure without ardor recapitulate the dominant discourse that those that are not heterosexual do not really exist or are not worthy of positive attention? Theoretically, not questioning is antithetical to a queer framework. Relationally, not to question and discuss has the potential to convey disinterest and devaluation, and bring the fear and uneasiness that comprise the general social context into the family system.

Summary & Reflections

The byword for Tatiana's family is cohesion, a closeness which was embodied in communication and family structure. As the parents of an only child, Tatiana's mother and father created a family system in which their daughter can feel embedded and thrive. The safety of this system was conveyed as ongoing and limitless. As the first family presented here with a biologically female child who does not identify as heterosexual, Tatiana's family brings some similar dynamics into the collection of families in the study. However, unique dynamics and relationships are also present, and stand out as attention is turned to Alison. She and her father comprise the fourth family case that will be presented in this chapter.

Alison's Family

"Until we evolve to the point where we redefine what we mean by family, what do we mean by value? Until it is centered on accepting each person just exactly the way they are, by my mind, and loving them for it." (Alison's Dad)

Introduction

Alison, a 22 year old college senior, originally volunteered herself, her mother, her father, and her siblings to participate in the current research study. As time passed, her mother opted out due to discomfort with the topic of the research. This also rendered her siblings' participation prohibitive. Interestingly enough, when Alison was asked to provide demographic information about her family on the Family Information Sheet, she circled middle class, Christian, Caucasian, and single mother as the descriptors she attributed to her family. Early during our first meeting Alison stated, "it's going to be interesting to have this interview where you have me and my dad and my girlfriend,

where I mostly grew up with my mom and my siblings.” In the end, Alison, her father, and her girlfriend participated in the interviews.

She identified her sexuality as “queer” and had been out to her father for 7 years.

I met with Alison and her father in her dad’s one room living space, which was located in a large residence in the downtown area of a mid-size mid-Atlantic city. As I entered Alison’s father’s room, soft music was playing as I settled in on the sofa and began to look at the photographs that were in frames all around the room. Pictures of Alison and her siblings were sitting on every surface, the dresser, the mantle, the desk. As I took in my surroundings, I began to notice the family resemblances of the many faces in the photographs. From where I sat, I could piece together a timeline of Alison’s life as the snapshots depicted her from a young girl to a young woman. Alison’s girlfriend joined us for the first interview, but not for the second. During the second interview, Alison and her father discussed a photograph which symbolized their relationship. All the family participants shared openly and honestly the joys and pains of their lives together.

Themes

The data collected over the course of the two family interviews and one individual interview with Alison and her family yielded five themes: *Family Dynamics*, *Relationship Dynamics*, *Sexuality*, *Addiction*, and *Social Influences*. By way of definition, *Family Dynamics* includes Alison’s and her father’s constructions of their family, including generational influences, members and roles and ideas about the future. *Relationship Dynamics* is more descriptive of the patterns of family interaction. Communication, emotional expression, and socialization processes are included as part of

this theme and have been derived from dialogue, observation, and material culture. *Sexuality*, the third within case theme, is comprised of those discussions around sexual orientation, gender, developmental issues, and the coming out experience. *Social influences* are indicative of those institutions, settings, and social ideals that have had an impact on Alison and her family. Finally, addiction is a pervasive issue in Alison's family and it stood out as a theme within this case. The theme of *Addiction* is comprised of constructions of addictive illness and behaviors and the impact of these on family relationships.

Family Dynamics

Alison's father began the conversation during our first family interview by creating a context which was based on his family of origin. He shared that in his family "everything revolved around lasting marriages." Significant to both Alison's and her father's experiences was the divorce of Alison's parents. "Divorce really was not part of the landscape until my generation." Alison's father's statement and his experiences with marriage placed him in a contradictory relation to the existing family customs and norms. He described his current construction of family as different from that to which he had been exposed and taught. "I don't look at family these days in terms of pieces of paper that bind people together for life, but in terms of spiritual connections that we make and that never die no matter how they change." Referring to his daughter he stated, "I've got a really tight [connection] with this young lady." These comments from Alison's father laid the foundation on which we built an understanding of their relationship.

The influence of family of origin on both of her parents' sides was significant for Alison. Described as her "grandmother's namesake," Alison's father characterized the

fact that his daughter carried her grandmother's name as a "very deep thing to Alison's mom." Alison, who described how her grandmother had passed away shortly after childbirth, added that "mothering has always been important to mom because she never had a mother and so I ended up with my grandmother's name, which is pretty significant I think." This significance as Alison described it to her father certainly had an impact on her in terms of her role and position in her family system.

...It was a very strange thing because it was part – a lot of it was the favorite child thing and a special treatment thing and a big part of what I think upset my sister a lot, my next [youngest] sister was that, well because when we were younger, you weren't around a lot – and mom worked all the time and so I ended up getting a lot of parent responsibilities....

Alison expressed insight into her role in the family based on the privileged status that she held. "I can't renounce being her favorite child, that's not within my control, but I renounce any kind of power that I had over her as a kid because of that. Because I would get designated power and responsibility...." Besides being designated with power and responsibilities over her siblings, she also described her relationship with her mother in terms of fulfilling another role in the family.

I just look back and know how difficult it was for my mom to take care of us on her own and also just trouble with a lot of suicidal depression and a lot of things going on in her life and a lot of stuff that she would hide from all of the kids except for me. So I got to see that side of things and then I think sort of sympathize very closely with her on those levels, which makes me very defensive of her....

Later in our discussion, Alison seemed to liken this role to a friendship with her mother. “I usually took the role of – she didn’t have a lot of friends and she didn’t have another adult in the house and I took the role of listening to her about everything that was going on [with] her....” Through this role Alison suggested that she and her mother had “developed closeness.”

As Alison described previously, these roles had an impact on her relationships with her siblings. One of four children, Dad described Alison’s youngest sister as “effervescent” and “spontaneous” and her brother as “a pretty centered little guy.” Alison added that her “youngest sister has apparently taken to jabbing at my mom a little bit and teasing her...she’s apparently taken to bringing up my girlfriend in conversation on a somewhat frequent basis.” As she described it “she doesn’t care that she’s being annoying or that she might potentially be hurtful, she’s just going to bring it up because it needs to be brought up.” While Alison’s position and role in the family has influenced her youngest siblings and their interactions within the family, as she and her father described it, Alison’s next youngest sister had borne the brunt of impact from Alison’s family status. Dad shared that, “It was always a priority to keep Alison in a private school, to keep Alison having her music lessons, – that had some fallout on her sister big time. She is the second child, just 20 months.” Describing this sister as “fiercely independent,” Alison’s father spoke of what he described as an “unfortunate dynamic” between his daughters.

She had to feel whether she could see it or not, she had to feel like I was constantly trying to domineer and control often as the whip at the hand of her

mom and all that negative energy that came through that and just being basically second class citizen to Alison.

Alison discussed realizing the strain on her relationship with her sister and trying to repair it at an early age.

I remember that, like, feeling like a lot of pressure particularly when I got to be about 15 and started thinking about my relationship with my sister and trying to figure out how I could – like where to even start with repairing it. Where do you even – where could I go back to make things right and I'm still kind of working on that. We're on really good terms right now, but there's still a lot of – partly because she holds – part of her independent streak is she won't say a lot of what she's thinking in kind of like a straight forward way.

Based on these and other comments, Alison seemed to be continuing to not only make sense out of her past with her sister, but also gaining some insight into their current relationship.

Relationship Dynamics

The underlying processes that comprise those familial dynamics described under the previous theme are support and concern, expressions of emotion, socialization, conflict, and communication.

Alison described support from within her family in terms of type and degree. She described her siblings as “very supportive,” particularly related to her romantic relationships. “My siblings are all, not only very supportive, but really like my girlfriend and like really have never been, have never been judgmental about my same-sex attractions, have never been.” This connection and appreciation of her relationships

seemed very important to Alison as she expressed a great value in her connection with her girlfriend. Alison, her girlfriend and her father characterized the support they felt within their family as they discussed the past summer.

Alison: I knew that dad was going to come live with us and at the time was kind of dreading it and was like, "Oh, I don't know what to do and I don't want to throw all this on you. That's not fair." At the time I'm thinking this is my family issues and you don't need to be thrown into the middle of them.

Girlfriend: At the time my thinking was, "This is your life experience, I'm going to help you with it."

Dad: There you go, there's a choice of love.

Girlfriend: And the summer definitely wasn't something that was impassable. I glided right on through the summer.

Alison: Amazing.

As I listened to and observed this interaction, I could sense the support and connection between the individuals in the room, those individuals whom Alison had constructed as her family.

Of all the supportive relationships that Alison's family described, the father-daughter relationship garnered special attention and consideration during the interviews. Considering all of the parent relationships she had experienced, both with her biological parents and stepparents, she characterized the relationship with her dad as unmatched in comparison.

It's an interesting kind of dynamic too 'cause out of all of our biological parents and my step-dad, my dad is the only one who has been really supportive of this relationship [with my girlfriend] and that's – well it's good to get one right?

Alison suggested that supportive wasn't descriptive enough to convey the essence of her relationship with her father. The connection seemed deeper on the level of shared values and worldview.

So it's been really good to have a parent who I think has been – not – and not just supportive because that's kind of a bland word, but non-judgmental and I think more, more caring about how I'm feeling and how I'm doing than if I'm doing things properly and if I'm going through the steps to get to those families that are tied together by pieces of paper and like that sort of thing.

Alison's father pointed out that the feelings of support and non-judgment have been mutual, a stance that at times has come with potentially painful and futile consequences for his daughter.

I'll just say that she has put herself out there and - I won't say terrifically risky situations, but put herself in positions, you know, most people would have said, stay away, leave it alone, it's going where it's going. You know, and more than once. Sometimes with good results, sometimes with very painful results...

He went on to add that, “after that period of time, when I think you were like 12, ... [of] just total rejection...- from that point forward, whether things have been going well for me or badly for me, Alison has just been there.”

Supportive relationships in the family were related to and often indicative of feelings of closeness and estrangements between family members. Alison's father shared

that “I’ve been very estranged from all of my four children as a result of events that I precipitated in my life ...but Alison and I after going through a very distant phase, we’ve been really really close.” Alison concurred. “Like dad was saying, there was like a year and a half where we didn’t even talk and then started to get a lot closer when I was about 14.” The family symbol that they brought into the discussion served as an illustration of the catalyst for reuniting Alison and her father. Alison shared the story behind the photo of her and her father playing music together.

What I like about it when I think about it, for the two of us, is we started playing music together when I was about 13, I think, and there was a time period of about, I don't know, 8 months, or something like that, where I didn't talk to my dad at all. And then kind of after that was when we started playing music.

Dad added to his daughter’s illustration by describing the bond that the two experience through music.

It means a lot to both of us. It's a heart connection. It's an emotional connection. And Alison has just been accepting my journey of very, very, extremely, wonderfully helpful at times when I was insane. And just the music connection and being able to get in that place....

Dad’s mention of “insane” times in his life, referring to his struggles with addiction, led to further discussion of the depth of his relationship with this daughter. “It's like we're connected at that core level where she understands that there is nothing evil about me.” Alison, as she had mentioned about her relationships with her mother and her sister, spoke of how she had strived to form a rewarding connection with her father despite these issues.

I tried to have a more productive relationship than that, but it's been good for me to try to figure out when I shouldn't put up with certain things, and like when I do need to step back, and when I can be there in a way that's different from - like what's the right way to be supportive, I guess, without draining myself too much.

For Alison, close and supportive relationships were something she seemed to put work into constructing. As her family relationships related to her sexuality, she shared with her dad what made her connection with him particularly supportive for her.

Since we are talking about gay or queer youth, I think that and a couple of other things have been - the way that you've been supportive of me in particular ways that mom hasn't, in terms of like actually listening and wanting to know about my life.

This aspect of knowing one another in the family seemed to be the link between supportive and close relationships and the communication patterns that existed within the family system. Alison frequently characterized communication as not only a way in which to share thoughts and ideas, but also a way in which support and closeness was demonstrated in the family. Comparing her mother and father in terms of communication, Alison stated,

So it's not that my mom is not supportive, and it's not that I haven't been supportive of her, but it's a more, maybe a more traditional parent-child relationship or something like that where we don't have the frankness and openness of communication that I think [my father and I] have.

The connection between communication and support within the family was also evident as Alison explained to her father why she cut off communication with him as a young

adolescent. “The reason that I stopped talking to you in the first place was because I was trying to be supportive of my mom who was really horribly depressed about a lot of things at that time.” In terms of discussing her same-sex attractions with her parents, Alison also constructed her reasons around aspects of relationships, which she conveyed in conversation with her father.

For some reason it didn't feel like it was something that made sense for me to talk about [with you]. Like it made more sense for me to talk about it with my mom because I knew she was going to be very upset and judgmental. So it made sense to – and I guess I never felt compelled to talk to you about it 'cause it just didn't seem like it would be an issue. And it never – I mean it never really has been.

Here Alison seemed to explain how the nature of relationships in her family is indicative of the types of conversations and levels of disclosures that she feels the need to make. She also made the point that closeness means having a voice and being understood. “It's never been something that I had to sit down and like, ‘Listen you're not paying attention to what I'm saying and what I'm feeling’.” The nature of the relationship with her father, the closeness and non-judgment, seemed to lessen the need for Alison to explain or justify herself to him. “It's not something that we've had to talk about in kind of explicit personal terms like I had with my mom as much as she doesn't want to listen to it.”

Communication in the family was also patterned around socialization processes, which Alison discussed in terms of lessons conveyed and learned from both of her parents. She shared how her mother has been open about her own life experiences for Alison's “whole life.”

Her life experience has told her that certain things are easier than others, and she's trying to lecture me about her, like, experience. And I think one of the things that's different about - like I've known more of my mom's life stories from my whole life. She's always told me about them, been open about them, and saved some until I was older, so there are a lot of these life stories that I know and have incorporated into the way that I think about things.

Despite the openness she felt she had received from her mother, Alison also shared insight into the difference between the lessons and stories she has heard from her mother and father. "The difference in the way that Mom tells stories and the way you tell stories, I think, is that [mom's story] leads to a conclusion that's been drawn in the last 5 or 10 years rather than what the story might have meant when it actually happened." Alison shared her conclusion that her mother's stories often were designed to make a point that was not inherent in her mother's original experience. She experienced learning things from her father differently, as she shared with him during the interview.

I don't know if you give advice so much as like suggestions or hints or descriptions of what's helped you, which maybe is a kind of advice, but it's not as prescriptive as the type of advice that I get from mom. And a lot of the time, the advice I get from mom is not something I ask for.

Alison's father also shared that he had learned from his daughter. "Of course, I mean, it's obvious. I'm 56 years old, and I wish I could be as comfortable with myself as Alison is, and she's 22. And I don't think I need to say any more about that. Period. Inspiration."

Sexuality

One topic that was characterized by open communication in the family was sexuality. Alison and her father did not convey one single event in which Alison disclosed her sexual orientation to her family. By all accounts, the understanding of Alison's sexuality in the family developed over time and began at a young age. Alison mentioned being "younger" when she "started talking to my mom about how I had these attractions to girls." Alison further defined "younger" as she described an interaction between her and her mother.

I remember my mom sitting me down when I was like four. Because I was a very boyish four year old, she sat me down at one point and said, like, well, if you grow up and you're attracted to women, that's okay, but it's going to be a much harder life for you. And that's - and I think I responded with something like, uh, girls are gross. And Mom was like, no, this is a bad sign.

Notions of gender seemed inherent in the family's constructions of sexuality and the person that Alison might become. Her dad also shared an early memory of his daughter.

I remember when Alison, she learned to talk at a very early age. ...Alison had a little imaginary friend and I've forgotten, it was a one syllable name, it wasn't Tom or Pete, it was something. You had an imaginary friend and almost from the moment she could speak, in terms of her sexual identity, the first incarnation was, "I am a boy." Ok. And then the next incarnation was, "I want to be a boy." And then the next one was, and this was from the time she was maybe 2 ½ till 5 or so, then it was, "I just like being with boys."

These two recollections typified the messages that Alison received from her parents regarding both aspects of her gender and her sexuality. Alison shared with her father and me that her mother would tell her that her attractions and gender expressions were based in “confusion.” “She’ll blame herself for marrying you or [say] ‘it’s my fault that I picked this person who wasn’t a strong male influence and then I was working on the time and that confused your notions of gender.’” Referring back to the stories and lessons Alison heard from her mother, she stated that her discussions with her mother regarding sexuality often led to the conclusion that, in Alison’s words, “hopefully you’ll grow out of it, if you don’t, I understand, but I’m sorry you have to be damaged in this way.” Alison’s father expressed a completely dichotomous stance which he shared emphatically and directly in a dialogue with his daughter.

Dad: At some point in the middle of this conversation did someone say something about damaged? Alison, damaged?

Alison: Oh yeah, my mom thinks I’m damaged and it’s her fault.

Dad: Alison is NOT damaged.

This interaction came at the end of the first interview. Alison’s father added his comments about his daughter so as not to leave the prior sentiment resonating. This interaction characterized the support and caring that I often sensed and observed between this father and daughter.

Addiction

The role of addiction in Alison’s family became an important theme which impacted many if not all of the family relationships. Alison’s father provided a timeline of his addiction which he referred to as “a state of just intense instability.” “From ’95

through about the end of about '98 and then maybe '98 to 2002, 2003 things leveled out....” He associated his “leveling out” with the time he met his current wife. Alluding to the relational aspects of his addiction, he shared that “I wound up relapsing and my wife did not push away, she just went down in flames with me.” Alison’s dad shared that his current marriage appeared to be ending.

Alison stated that her dad’s addiction had “impacted our entire relationship.” She indicated that the impact has been at least in part to her father’s experience of recovery. “He’s had to make a lot of personal transformations in order to survive addiction, and he’s dealing with it.” Alison also provided some insight into the impact of addiction on the more core dynamics of her relationship with her father. “But I think too that because there’s been so many times where I’ve acted as the caretaker, the supporter or something like that, like levels the playing field of our relationship.” This “level playing field” between her and her father impacted the way that she receives, and the perspective she takes, on advice and guidance from him. “[He] could behave like my mom and say that he knows better for me in this regard and better for me in that regard, but there would be no point in doing that ...I wouldn’t put any stock in it.” At another point, Alison suggested that the role of addiction in her relationship with her father had also contributed to the non-judgmental nature of their relationship. “If you were judgmental with me I would have to be really pissed.” Here Alison suggested that as she had accepted her father unconditionally, he should also accept her in kind.

In addition to contributing to the unconditional acceptance and non-judgmental nature of their relationship, both father and daughter agreed that the family’s experience with addiction had fostered resilience in them as individuals as well as in their

relationship. Dad expressed that resilience was an essential quality for “those in the thick of addiction.” Alison described how her experiences had made her “tough.”

I feel like dealing with issues surrounding addiction, and for my mom surrounding depression, and for me personally has been more just like something that happened, and something I felt like I created, which is I would characterize as like a toughness, so it's more just putting up with whatever, dealing with it in whatever way I could, and then now has - I think it's been a much more deliberate process for me to try to figure out how to deal with difficult emotions that come with addiction or depression or divorce or whatever...

In terms of relational resilience, Alison drew the distinction between connection, isolation, and self protection. She shared that she was learning to take care of herself in relation to her parents.

I think, I've always felt like I was pretty resilient or tough emotionally when I was younger, and I think the most recent formation in that has been trying to figure out how to be resilient without being - without being tough necessarily, in the sense, like without putting up emotional barriers that don't need to be there, or that might need to be there during a crazy crisis situation, but don't need to be there after that, and trying to figure out where they are and take them down.

Social Influences

At several points during our interviews, the parallels between Dad's experiences with addiction and Alison's experiences with sexuality were discussed. These parallels not only were present within the father-daughter relationship as evidenced by the reciprocal non-judgmental stance and unconditional acceptance that had been described,

but also in terms of the manner in which Alison and her dad navigated their respective and collective social environments. During our discussion of their family symbol, Alison pointed out that through music and performance with her father, she found a place where she felt included.

I never felt like I would fit in, fit in, but I could see, you know, relatively healthy, relatively productive fun grown-up people that were not society's picture of what people ought to be and interact with them. And they encouraged me and included me and that kind of thing, which was nice.

Within the cohort of people that her father brought her into, Alison described feeling a sense of “fit” and belonging. She fondly shared that “they would have conversations with me, which was really great.” For her father, finding a place to “fit” socially became an introspective journey within his recovery. He shared, “I’ve found that whole dynamic of how one relates to other people really reflects one’s own internal dynamic.” Like so much of the worldview that he shared with his daughter, Alison’s dad articulated the sense of internal self-awareness that grounded his life.

Other social influences on the family came from the church and education. When we discussed external influences on the family, Alison pointed out that religion “has, I think, really influenced our wider family.” She shared that her father came from a “Pentecostal heritage” with a family career history of ministry. In response to his daughter’s comments about his religious background, Alison’s dad said, “I pretty much abandoned the church precepts a long time ago in terms of organizational structure. ...I have no use for churches that teach morals from the top down.” From the other side of her family, Alison shared that her mom “grew up in a Southern Baptist family.” She

went on to share that her mother “left the church when she was 14, because the preacher refused to hold an integrated service.”

Despite both of her parents’ apparent estrangement from organized religion at points in time, Alison and her family went to church “like 3 times a week” when she was growing up. She described very poignantly how church teachings informed her decisions about relationships in her family. “My thought was, well, God would want me to stop talking to my dad so that he would start doing the right thing. If I stop talking to him, maybe he’ll straighten out.” Although she said she didn’t particularly “like the church very much,” Alison also acknowledged that it did influence her current view of her father and others.

We went to church so often, like reading Christian scripture was - where it started as a little kid. Where this idea of unconditional love as like a goal started, and I didn't like the church very much. But I think that's where the seed of it is....

Her father carefully listened as Alison spoke of her upbringing in the church and experiences with religion. Later in our conversation, he referred back to Alison’s previous comments with agreement. “What Alison said about seeds really resonated, because the basic Christian moral philosophy, God is love, and those sorts of things, ultimately, that winds up being the key.”

Alison constructed education as an external social influence on her family. She posed to her father that “I’m not sure how much you’ll agree with this, but something that I think has influenced the way we interact has to do with the fact that you guys were first-generation college students.” She went on to speak about how not having a history of college education in the family may have had a particular influence on her mother.

I see it influencing my mom in the fact that she was raised by her father who only had a sixth grade education, really smart guy but with only a sixth grade formal education in rural southern part of the state, and, you know, was an outsider and weirdo for, I think, a lot of her young life.

As a result of their education, both of Alison's parents became involved in "high powered" career fields. Alison spoke of how these prestigious educational career experiences had impacted the things that she was taught as she moved through her own education. "The way that I see that influencing our family is that that's why she says things to me like you should be thinking about what you want to do with your career." Alison's dad described the impact of education and career in the life of his family a bit differently. He pointed out the impact of cultural values and acceptance in terms of the excess that the educational and career achievements of him and his former spouse brought into the family system.

And so money, power, prestige, success, big houses, big cars, big families, kids in nice school, the whole nine yards is an addiction, like a personality. Some people can wear it loosely without completely having their souls stuck in it, but not me. And you think, oh well, having a nice house, having a nice family, having kids in nice school, I mean, great, that's a major cultural - go, go team! You know, success out of country boy and country girl living, success, go team, go!

Seemingly in contrast with the lifestyle of excess and assumed privilege that her father described, Alison posited a concern for social justice issues to have influenced her family. "I think that's an outside influence that I left out a little bit was the - both of my parents have been concerned with social justice issues from the time I was little, but in

very different [ways].” Again, rooting this social influence in family history, Alison constructed her perception of her mother’s past. “My mom came up with integration being at the center of... the national stage at that time, and that, I think, influenced not just me but our relationship.” Alison described her mother as having “gotten more conservative,” but attributed her experiences with social issues as enabling her to “say things like, okay, well, I know you're in this relationship, but I still love you, and I'm always going to support you.” Alison found further explanation in her mother’s past experiences as she related them to their current relationship and the way she felt her mother sees her and her future.

She's always had gay friends and always supported them...she's had really close relationships with gay men...and the AIDS epidemic, that was very formative for her too, and that also probably plays a part in why she really hopes that I would make what she thinks of as an easier decision for my life.

Family Development Perspective

From a perspective of family development theory, the way in which Alison, her father, and her girlfriend constructed both their family and their family’s lived experiences revealed a high degree of closeness and open communication within the family system. At the same time, anecdotal accounts of Alison’s relationship with her mother were constructed differently and still different relational nuances existed between Alison and her siblings. These three distinct subsystems came forward in the data as family experiences were conveyed and shared by Alison and her dad.

The emotional climate of the family varied depending on the subsystem in question. Alison and her father seemed very close and frequently spoke of a deep almost

spiritual connection. Their relationship was highly characterized by closeness and mutual support as well as a respect for differences and life circumstances. Speaking about sexuality, family, and values, Alison's father described this respect and unconditional acceptance. He suggested that a definition of family "is centered on accepting each person just exactly the way they are, by my mind, and loving them for it." Alison's dad frequently expressed his feelings openly during our interviews particularly as they related to love and acceptance and how he might offer those things to his daughter. "You do what you do, I love you for it and make choices." He also framed this process of loving and accepting in terms of achieving a connection with his daughter, understanding her, and then supporting her. "And just saying cool. What do you like? What touches your heart? What matters to you? Why? Well let's encourage that. ...to me this is hugely important in father-daughter, husband-wife, lover-friend, [in] any kind of relationship...."

With the emotional climate of her relationship with her father characterized in this way, Alison constructed the relationship with her mother differently. Emotionally, Alison seemed to garner unconditional respect and regard to a lesser degree from her mother than from her father. Being somehow damaged, not having an adequate father figure, and harboring a hatred for men typified the messages that Alison perceived from her mother. Based on what Alison shared during the interviews, she attributed these messages to her mother's life experiences rather than her mother as a person. "That's like a conflicting thing, but it's hard for me to be angry or at least to be angry at her. It will make me more angry at a string of events or her life pattern or whatever." Alison viewed these "events" and "patterns" as making her mother a strong person. "Mom, to me, was this wonderful strong person who was dealing with a lot of struggles in her life

and taking care of them.” Despite the different aspects of respect and acceptance that Alison experienced with her mother, she still was connected with her. According to Alison’s father her mother “is a very loving, compassionate, dedicated, over the top responsible person. In terms of a mother to these children, they could and can always count on her to be there, to make whatever sacrifice needs to be made on her part to support them.” For Alison, these qualities perhaps met different needs in her life as a young person. What may have lacked for her in terms of emotionality was potentially compensated for in terms of family organization and structure. In terms of interaction, Alison constructed communication with her dad in very esoteric and philosophical ways, suggesting that she often receives “suggestions or hints or descriptions of what’s helped [him]” when she presents him with problems or issues. Comparatively, she perceived the same type of interaction with her mother as “prescriptive” and much more based in practicality. As Alison compared her relationships with her parents, she stated “So it’s not that my mom is not supportive...but it’s a more, maybe a more traditional parent-child relationship.” Drawing this relational distinction, Alison framed her relationship with her father not as a “parent-child relationship” but perhaps more characteristic of relationship she might have with a peer.

Communication in Alison’s family was an aspect of relational processing that warrants emphasis. Within the family system, communication has been used as a tool to not only express emotion but to convey emotion through silence or a lack of expression. On several instances throughout the interviews both Alison and her father relayed accounts of periods of time when family members were estranged or not speaking. As noted in the researcher’s reflexive journal, at the time of the interview Alison’s next

youngest sister did not participate as planned because of a current estrangement from her father. The relationship between Alison and her father was typified by a history of cutting off communication, which Alison described as strategic and deliberate, designed to send a message to her dad. Rules around communication with regard to sexuality were also in place. One such rule was with regard to Alison's stepdad.

She [mom] wanted me to not talk to him [stepdad] about any of this and he's a very quiet, stoic guy and he's also a grown man and I don't think this is actually gonna – but she wanted for some reason to protect him from – and that was very much the sense that I had was a sense of protection and shielding him from these weird things that were going on in her family.

These rules about communication were also broken in the family, again in a manner which seemed strategic and designed to evoke a reaction. “My youngest sister has apparently taken to jabbing at my mom a little bit and teasing her.” This “jabbing” and “teasing” as Alison described it was apparently related to Alison and her girlfriend, a family topic that was described as taboo.

The role of addiction in the relational process of Alison's family was also salient. Her father's struggles as they were depicted seemed to shade interactions among all family members in both positive and negative ways. In his recovery, Alison's father had gained some insight into the role of relationships in his life and the notion of giving love to receive love. “Love is the key, you find it here [gestures to his heart], and the power is in you, period. So that's why it comes full circle for me, because that's what recovery is all about.” He and his daughter seemed to connect regarding the “practice of unconditional love.” At the same time, Alison spoke several times about her personal

work toward balance and learning the appropriate way to support and engage with her father. She also expressed a sort of negotiation that occurred around issues of judgment. She told her father, "If you were judgmental with me I would have to be really pissed.," suggesting that there was no room for judgment in their relationship given all that Alison had been through and accepted about her father. Addiction had facilitated a sense of equity, and possibly an entitlement to equity, in terms of unconditional love, regard, and acceptance in Alison's relationship with her father.

Queer Theory Critique

Queer theory informs Allison's family's experiences in several ways. Alison identified her self as "queer" and indicated that this term seemed relevant and appropriate to her experience. Her father spoke historically of her process of identification, sharing that the first label he remembered was "bisexual," which Alison used on her study abroad application. "And right there in the letter in black and white was, I'm vegan, or vegetarian, but I don't mind being around people who eat meat. I'm also bi-sexual...and I'm going, 'Whoa!'" Dad shared that his reaction wasn't out of "shock or amazement," but more a concern about how out his daughter might be perceived in this particular situation.

Dad's denial of shock and amazement seemed reasonable as by all accounts, Alison's non-heterosexual orientation was part of the family system from as early as three years old. Initially constructed around gender, Dad recalled her making statements such as "I am a boy." Alison recalled speaking with her mother about what she termed an "attraction to girls" when she was younger. Interestingly, Alison and her father did not designate or discuss a singular coming out event or experience. Instead, they

described a developmental progression of gender and sexual attractions that brought them to the point they described during this research, a point that defies identification and instead evokes process over content, being over labeling, and queerness over social constructions of sexuality.

Relationships between family members also offered an opportunity for queer critique. As a queer girl and young queer woman, Alison received messages from her family that would seem to have had a marginalizing effect. Alison described her mother's "moral" conclusions regarding her sexuality. "The conclusion is hopefully you'll grow out of it, if you don't, I understand, but I'm sorry you have to be damaged in this way." As early as age four, Alison recalled receiving messages such as "if you grow up and you're attracted to women, that's okay, but it's going to be a much harder life for you." While these messages pushed Alison toward the margins of her family system, her status and favor in the family was also apparent. Alison's father described her as "the favorite child" and described how as her "grandmother's namesake" she was kept in private education with music lessons even when family finances were tight. Alison discussed the "parent responsibilities" and that came with that status and described how she had fulfilled the role of confidant for her mother. Despite being told in not so many ways that she was less than, she was also treated as though she was greater than in relation to her siblings. While her given name was a label that carried with it privilege and a family legacy, her sexual and gender label queered that legacy.

Particularly because I'm the namesake and the favorite child and all of those things. And so that's a whole other complicated story that plays into all the sexuality stuff because my mom's convinced that I'll never have kids and this is a

horrible, horrible tragedy and for her, even if I were to raise kids that weren't mine... I guess in her fantasy world in her head that the ideal thing would be of course for me to marry a guy that I really, really cared about and then to raise kids with him, probably in part because she didn't get to do that in the ideal fairy tale way that she had hoped.

Alison's statement suggested that it is not her that is "damaged" but instead socially informed expectations that have been troubled and disturbed. Her statement also brought to light the idea that her sexuality is not at the core of this trouble, but instead those potential shortcomings and dashed hopes that existed within the family system but outside of Alison and her process of identification. In her family, Alison has always been true to herself. As her father put it, "you know, she always hated the little pink frilly dresses, the whites at Easter that her mom would dress her up in. And that's just Alison."

Summary & Reflections

Alison's family brings unique voices into the collection of cases presented in this chapter. During the course of the interviews, I continued to reflect on and explore the role of addiction in the family system as it influenced the acceptance of a queer daughter. Divorce has left Alison's family with several distinct subsystems and it seemed that what she didn't receive from her relationship with one parent, she was able to find with the other. Her presence in the family queered the system, not after a single event of disclosure, but really from the time she became aware of herself. Therefore, attachment, parenting, and relationship building as well as addiction and divorce all occurred within a queer family context.

Chapter Summary

Alison's family rounds out the collection of family cases in this study. The cases presented here utilized each family's collective voices to convey constructions of lived experiences. In addition to social constructionism, theoretical lenses derived from family development theory and queer theory provided perspectives for within case analyses and interpretation. The following chapter will examine the data presented here holistically. Through cross case analysis, the points of view and lived experiences of all four youth and their families will be united into a shared discourse, delineated by themes, and compared in order to distinguish aspects of shared as well as unique experiences.

CHAPTER 5

CROSS CASE ANALYSES

Introduction

Chapter Four presented the findings derived from each family case separately, illustrating each family's lived experiences through the use of their own words. Chapter Five combines the voices of the four youth and their families and explores not only the similarities and differences in their experiences, but also weaves the threads of their messages together creating a united voice. Through this united voice, one can hear thematic messages inherent in the phenomenology of each family. These themes are highly interpretive and represent a theoretical integration, combining elements of social construction, family development, and queer theory perspectives.

Overview of Analytical Procedure

Cross case analysis of data was conducted much in the same way that within case analysis was described in Chapter Four. Following the constant comparative method described by Rossman and Rallis (2003) and Erlandson et al (1993), code books for each family case were merged. The resulting book of codes and themes were then organized into categories based on similarity of thought and concept. These categories were then reorganized and narrowed until overarching thematic lines emerged. These overarching or cross case themes are presented in this chapter.

Themes

The manner in which the cross case themes are reported in this chapter is deliberate and designed to take the reader more deeply into the experience of the collection of families. *Family Connections*, the first cross case theme is derived largely

from the ways in which the families made meaning of and strived to maintain closeness with one another and cohesion within their family systems. These meanings were also inherent in the second theme, *Marginalization & Support*, which illuminates the systemic relationship between these dichotomous experiences in the families. The unique aspects of the second theme led to the consideration of how having a gay youth in the family served to transform the family system. The third cross case theme, *Queering the System*, explores this transformation. Finally, the fourth and final cross case theme provides a culmination point derived from the other three. The discussion of *Family Resilience* illustrates how relational processes within these families of gay youth affect a perseverant and enduring stance toward the stressors inherent in the interior and exterior contexts of the family life.

Cross Case Themes

Family Connections

The first theme is derived from data across all four cases reviewed and exemplifies the importance of *Family Connections*. Regardless of family form, structure, or relational dynamics, all four families articulated of the importance of connections with one another, the pain that resulted from estrangement and loss of connection, and the influence of family of origin on current connections between parents, children, and siblings.

Two subthemes stand out within this thematic thread. The first is *Family Legacy*. This subtheme is comprised of the influences that familial history has had on the current family systems described. In some cases this influence falls into the realm of what is valued or is important. In other cases, participants spoke of those aspects of family

history that they strived to avoid. In any case, the relational legacy passed down from prior generations was a salient aspect of the data collected across family participants. The second subtheme is *Closeness and Cohesion*. Each family member spoke about the importance of not only being connected with other members, but also a desire to feel close to one another. Periods of estrangement and distance described by certain families were consistently couched in a desire to reconnect and regain closeness. As described here, this subtheme comprises the ways in which participant families constructed closeness and strived for cohesion.

Family Legacy

Constructions of connections were associated with family of origin for all of the families of gay youth participating in this study. Parent participants often spoke of their own experiences as children and adolescents and how their relationships with family members informed how they would raise their families. For some families these family of origin relationships provided more of a rubric of what not to do for parents in the study, while others carried on the family's relational traditions.

The legacy of relationships in Cicero's family was not only based on family tradition but embedded in relational processes such as communication and adaptability. Cicero's parents modeled what Cicero described as a "solid, stable, committed relationship." This is similar to the history of family relationships described by Alison's father who talked about his perceptions of family growing up. "Throughout my childhood and most of my adult life, in terms of that family of origin...everything revolved around lasting marriages, everything." Despite these similarly constructed backgrounds, Cicero and Alison experienced this legacy of committed relationships

differently. For Cicero, commitment was distinctly present in his immediate family system. He shared that his parents taught him how to be in relationships. Cicero's family symbol reiterated this value of coupling and his mother stated quite emphatically that she and his father were ready to welcome their son's partner into the family. "I'm ready to extend the circle," his mother claimed, a comment that Cicero mentioned as being important and having an impact on him. "Well it was really, really good when my mom said something about being ready to open our family circle to my partner, that was really amazing – and I know that [my partner] was really happy to hear that." For Cicero, there seemed to be a desire to carry on the tradition of coupling and commitment that he had learned from his parents and that seemed so valued in his family system.

Alison's father, who at the time of the interview shared that he was "in the process of ending...my third marriage," no longer seemed to buy into the tradition of marriage in which he was socialized. "I don't look at family these days in terms of pieces of paper that bind people together for life." Although Alison did not speak as directly about her constructions of commitment in relationships and how this family history has influenced her, she frequently expressed how her family's acceptance of her relationship with her girlfriend was important to her. Alison spoke with pride when she described how her siblings like her girlfriend. "My siblings are all not only very supportive, but really like my girlfriend and like really have never been, have never been judgmental about my same-sex attractions." Acceptance from her mother was also important for Alison. After dating for a period of time she spoke of how she wanted to talk to her mother about her relationship. She said, "I do care about my mom a lot and I was like 'I really want you to meet this person'." Alison's girlfriend seemed to reciprocate

commitment, as she described a difficult time during the summer when Alison's father was coming to live with them. She spoke directly to Alison and said, "At the time my thinking was, 'This was your life experience, I'm going to help you with it'." Although Alison did not directly discuss her relationships in the context of her parent's marriage or her family of origin, like Cicero, she did seem to value coupling and commitment in her own life.

Tatiana's family and Yasai's family had different experiences with relationships in their families of origin. While both mothers disclosed that they were adopted, and all the parents in these two cases described or alluded to the fact that family of origin relationships were less than positive, Yasai's and Tatiana's current family systems were constructed around relationships in very different ways. For Tatiana's parents, both discussed how the legacy of relationships in their respective families of origin had served as a catalyst for change when they started a family of their own. Tatiana's mom said that, "I had a crappy childhood and I was determined when I had a child to do things extremely different." Part of this difference that she hoped to achieve was "to maintain an entirely different relationship [from the one] I dealt with." Tatiana's father agreed stating that "because of that disconnect in my own personal family, I wanted to strive to make sure that our relationship between the three of us was a good solid healthy relationship." Part of the extreme difference that Tatiana's parents wanted to enact was in the ways they communicated with each other, particularly in terms of facilitating honest and open communication with their daughter. According to Tatiana, this comfort with communication in her family impacted the way she disclosed her sexual attractions to her parents. Because of her relationship with her parents Tatiana described her coming

out experience as “nervous” but not wracked with anxiety. “I was more nervous of just like, I know they’re gonna be okay with it, but you always have that thought, but what if they’re not? ... I wasn’t terrified, I was just kind of nervous.”

The legacy of relationships in Yasai’s family was also constructed in less than positive terms. His mother spoke of abusive relationships as well as substance abuse and divorce. She described the criticism she received from her adoptive parents, sharing that she consistently received “blame” for “everything the kids got into,” felt that she was “never good enough,” and was told that she “wasn’t a good mother.” Unlike Tatiana’s family, in which these messages seemed to motivate change, many of the problems that Yasai’s mother experienced as a child were recapitulated in her own family with her husband and her sons. Over the course of three interviews, Yasai described multiple accounts of harassment and victimization within his family. Much of the victimization he spoke of was concerned with his sexual orientation. Name calling and physical altercations were not uncommon in Yasai’s descriptions of his home life. Just as she described her life growing up in her family of origin, Yasai’s mom described the current situation in her home as “abusive” toward her son.

In addition to the abuse in the home, Yasai and his mother described a history of estrangement from family members. These periods of time when connections were broken were often due to unresolved conflict and unsettled grudges. According to Yasai and his mother, currently the family had very little contact with any of his aunts and uncles. On several occasions Yasai would state how he wanted nothing to do with his extended family. “After grandma and grandpa die, if [my aunts, uncles, or cousins] even contact me I’ll tell them [I’m gay] just so they won’t talk to me because I don’t relate

with them; I don't like them." This pattern of estrangement was also present in Yasai's immediate family. After his mother and stepfather found out he was gay, Yasai disconnected from his mother for a period of years. Despite the abuse and estrangement that the family described, attempting to create closeness and becoming cohesive seemed to be a persistent goal over time.

Closeness and Cohesion

Like Yasai's family, closeness and cohesion with one another was a priority for all of the families who participated in the study. Despite all of the difficulties and hardship that Yasai experienced in his family, he consistently strived for connection with them. For Yasai and his mother, reconnecting happened much in the same way that disconnecting occurred. Just as the crisis of his school "outing" Yasai served to disconnect him from his mother, the crisis of a medical emergency brought them back together. "But ever since her health has been declining, I've gotten closer to her again. And she's accepted me for being gay." This acceptance from his mother is very important to Yasai and he described her expressions of acceptance during the interview as supportive for him. Those expressions also revealed the importance of closeness for Yasai's mother, who described Yasai as "all I've got." Acceptance of her son's sexual orientation provided Yasai's mother a route to closeness with her son. Speaking of her son being gay she shared, "if I don't accept it, I can't be close to Yasai."

Like Yasai, Alison and her father described some degree of disturbance due to factors such as divorce and substance abuse in the family. In addition, periods of estrangement between family members were also characteristic of the descriptions of lived experiences that Alison and her father constructed during the interviews. The

impact of these factors, however, took on different relational nuances than they did in Yasai's family system. Patterns of estrangement for example, were not always characterized as resulting from unresolved conflicts, but rather as ways to facilitate closeness with one parent or another. Alison described how she stopped talking to her father as a young adolescent as a means of supporting her mother. The manner in which she described reconnecting with her father through music seemed to be a means of reclaiming the closeness she desired with words, without betraying her closeness with her mother. Her father described a period of time when his daughter "was having nothing to do with me" until one day she "very casually said, 'I'm think I'm going to be taking up the guitar. Could you show me a few things?'" This simple request seemed to give Alison's dad a sense of relief, as if a wound was healed by this very "casual" gesture. "It was like Daddy's heart melted. Right there. Totally. Poof, boy. Amazing."

Closeness between Alison and her father also had specific nuances due to the family's experiences with addiction. When asked about how her father's addiction had impacted her relationship Alison stated, "It's impacted our entire relationship." Over the course of our time together, her father frequently expressed with pride the closeness he had with his daughter. Alison alluded to the fact that she has had to engage in some intentionality to build a relationship with her father that she described as "productive." She defined this quality in terms of relational boundaries with her father. "It's been good for me to try to figure out when I shouldn't put up with certain things and like when I do need to step back." Statements such as this one suggest a more unique relational dynamic in Alison's family than those that were observed in the other participants. This dynamic

of being very intentional and reflective regarding closeness in her relationship with her father was constructed around her experiences with addiction.

Alison also described intentionality as she tried to build and repair relationships with other family members as well. Reestablishing closeness with her sister, which Alison felt had become damaged because of her favored role in the family, was described as an ongoing endeavor on Alison's part. Beginning at around age 15, Alison shared that she began "trying to figure out how I could [and] even where to start with repairing it."

Like Yasai, Alison described receiving seemingly marginalizing messages within her family system, particularly from her mother. These messages notwithstanding, in her characteristic way, Alison also shared her experiences working in a very reflective and purposeful manner to maintain closeness with her mother. "It's hard for me to be – I can be disappointed or something or like sad sometimes or disconnected or whatever about my mom, my mom's stance to all of this." Despite the disappointment and disconnection that she described, Alison went on to share how she finds it difficult to be angry with her mother. She stated that it was those experiences in her mother's life that supported her beliefs that angered her. Alison summed up her construction of her relationship with her mother by stating that "it's not that my mom is not supportive...but it's a more, maybe a more traditional-parent child relationship." In this statement Alison suggests that in her family, closeness looks different based on the unique dynamics and perhaps structure of the relationship in question.

In Tatiana's family, closeness and cohesion were intentional and reflective constructions of her parents suggesting a different structural dynamic than what Alison described. As mentioned previously Tatiana's parents set out to develop a relationship

with their daughter that was characterized by open communication and honesty. The family used terms like “close knit” to describe their relationships and strived to ensure an ongoing “bond and connection” that would be stable over time. Tatiana’s mother described the closeness she and her husband tried to create as one that would carry “through into adulthood so that [Tatiana] always felt like she had someone there for her.” Structurally, creating this closeness with Tatiana was clearly believed to be a parent responsibility in the family. Her mother talked about how “close knit” relationships were established. “I think it’s a matter, as a parent, of how you rear your child in setting forth rules in the household...That it was based on structure and importance.” The rules that Tatiana’s mother spoke of here were not as much behavioral as they were relational. Rather than merely dictating curfews and household responsibilities, rules in Tatiana’s family were constructed more around respect for and communication with one another. For Tatiana’s family, cohesion was important and creating this degree of closeness and connection was the responsibility of the parent and achieved through organization and priority.

Cicero’s family also created closeness and cohesion through family structure and organization. Cicero pointed out that he learned about stability and commitment in relationships from his parents. This sentiment suggests that the parental subsystem in Cicero’s family represents a coalition that comprises those elements of closeness that were characteristic of the family in general. Moreover the data provided discourse to support this idea. For almost every topic of discussion, Cicero’s parents alluded to a foundation of couple communication which supported coalitional decision making and parenting. This was certainly present when Cicero disclosed to his parents that he was

gay. Cicero's mother talked about her feeling that she and her husband "process things well" and "made time to talk." This intentionality in creating relational process is reminiscent of Tatiana's parents, who also worked to achieve closeness and cohesion in the family through structure and communication. Also like Tatiana's family, closeness was tempered with thoughtful boundaries. While discussions about Cicero's sexual orientation were present and open both between parents and with their son, the family also observed certain limitations as to what was discussed. They joked together as his mother pointed out that "it doesn't matter what sexual orientation you are," there are certain things that young people don't share with their parents.

Maintaining family connections was important among all four family participants. For some, sustaining these connections seemed built into the ways in which their family system operated, both presently and historically. For others, intentionality was required from the gay youth in the family to manage connections with parents and siblings. Regardless of the ease or difficulty of remaining connected, these families seemed to strive to do so. This striving was embedded in the relational processes that existed in the family system, including patterns of communication, family hierarchy and structure, parent coalitions, and systems of support. These systems of support are explored more thoroughly in the second cross case theme, which examines accounts of marginalization and support across the four families.

Marginalization & Support

The second cross case theme that emerged from the data set as a whole was *Marginalization & Support*. Indicative of two seemingly dichotomous processes, the systemic nature of this theme is implied in its title. The families in the study relayed

collective and individual experiences of harassment and discrimination which served to push both the youth and their families out of the dominant position to the margins of social acceptance. These forms of social victimization were found both within and outside of the immediate family system. In some accounts, family members recapitulated homophobic and sexist social discourse in their relationships with their gay, bisexual, and queer children. In other instances, social institutions such as schools, churches, and places of employment were the culprits. Within the families, regardless of the source, experiences of homophobia, sexism, and harassment were balanced with relationships characterized by care, concern, and protection. Based on this interpreted systemic relationship, the three subthemes related to *Marginalization & Support* are *Internal Marginalization, External Marginalization, and Supportive Family Relationships*.

Internal Marginalization

Internal marginalization, or those forms of marginalization that occur within the family system, were present in all of the participant families. Just as with social forms of discrimination, in some families instances of marginalizing experiences were more subtle than in others. Yasai and Alison described instances of harassment and discrimination within their families that were more obviously identified in the data. In Yasai's family, the prevalence of abuse and harassment related to his sexual orientation served to literally push him out of the family, which resulted in years of estrangement from his mother. Away from his family center, Yasai described living on what could be construed as the margins of society. "I mean some of the people I was around weren't exactly the best. They weren't the worst but they weren't really that good. I was friends with one woman who was a recovering heroin addict."

Alison didn't directly construct her family experiences as marginalizing, but here they are interpreted as such. Messages she received from her parental caretaker of being "damaged" and the blame her mother assumed for the fact that her daughter was not heterosexual are examples on which this interpretation is based. Support for this interpretation was inherent in Alison's emotional and relational responses to these messages. Reacting to what she described as her "mom's stance to all of this," Alison shared emotions such as disappointment, sadness and feelings of disconnection. "In particular what bothers me is that she wants to think this is all her fault and so it's me doing these things is causing her more stress so that's like a conflicting thing." Alison extended this conflicted feeling as she described that it is difficult for her to be angry at her mother for the way she constructs the experience of having a queer daughter. While the conflict and estrangement for Alison was not physical as it was for Yasai, the feelings and experiences that she described suggest a level of relational estrangement nonetheless.

Tatiana and Cicero did not construct their family experiences as directly marginalizing. For the most part their families described their experiences with each other in fairly positive terms. Cicero's family did describe rules around communication which they collectively seemed to question. At the time of their son's coming out, Cicero's parents made the decision not to tell his youngest sibling, a decision which his father constructed around notions of developmental readiness. During the interview, Cicero's parents seemed to question this decision in hindsight, his father posing the question "What's appropriate to share?" during the family's discussion of the issue. Cicero recalled the decision and his parents making him aware of it, to which he responded, "It didn't bother me." Later in the conversation, however, Cicero mentioned

that, "I think looking back on it I kind of had some doubts or something. Just because I kind of feel like, if it's nothing to be ashamed of, then what's the point of hiding it."

Here his parent's decision to structure family communication may have served to cause Cicero to question issues of shame and acceptance. If nothing else he expressed his sense of "doubts or something."

Marginalization within the four family systems was evident in direct observable ways as well as more subtle ways within the data. Yasai in particular expressed his sense of anger and disappointment as his experiences and described a coping pattern of breaking connections and relations. Alison, on the other hand, seemed to seek understanding as a means of coping, and as discussed previously worked to repair and renew connections despite negative messages from parents. Other potentially marginalizing events that occurred within the four families were perhaps less direct and overt and may even have gone unrecognized. Youth, however, expressed feelings of disappointment, doubt, and disconnection despite the overt or covert nature of these events. In these feelings lie the relational consequences of external messages corrupting the family system. The presence of these external or social messages warrants exploration in the context of the participant families' experiences with them.

External Marginalization

All four families described instances of external marginalization, which for the purpose of this theme is defined through the data. This definition includes events of harassment, discrimination, and violence based on sexual orientation and gender that occur outside of the family system. Outside or external to the family system indicates that these events occurred as part of the families' interactions with peers and institutions

in their communities. In accordance with accounts of such events in the data, this type of marginalization was not confined to the experiences of the identified gay youth in the family. Parents and partners also described instances where they were discriminated against or looked upon with judgment.

Among all youth in the study, school was a common institutional source of discrimination. Tatiana and her mother described some “traumatic” events in middle school that were cause for concern on her mother’s part. Yasai described how he was not only “outed” to his mother by a school administrator, but also relayed a history of harassment and violence from peers. His mother described how violence at home carried over into school when she shared that on one or more occasions Yasai’s brother “was the one at school who was beating on him.” Like Yasai, Cicero’s experiences in school resulted in isolation and loneliness. He described being harassed by peers, whom he described as “relentless” both in and outside of the classroom. By the time Cicero reached college, he described truly feeling the impact of institutionalized discrimination. “It wasn’t exactly aimed at me per se, but I would say I never felt more discriminated against in a sense than my freshman year in college.” Cicero went onto say, “Maybe it wasn’t an active effort on peoples’ parts. But it was just so uninviting and sort of a very cold place.” For Cicero his experiences of instances of harassment and discrimination had become environmental and culturally engrained.

Church and organized religion also served as a marginalizing force in some instances. Yasai’s mother spoke about her socialization by the church as a young girl and how it impacted her acceptance of her son as a gay person. “There’s gay people out there and even if you know them you don’t know they’re gay..., so you just go to the church

'cause your parents take you every Sunday and you believe what they tell you to believe." Yasai also shared a story about an instance when he felt he needed to defend himself to his neighbor's children, who had made some negative remarks about gays in the name of religion. "I was trying to get them to use their brains instead of their parents dictating that religion says everything." When his mother chastised him for going against what the neighbors had taught their children, Yasai replied, "How would you like to be treated like that!" which seemed to emphasize how demoralizing the experience was for him.

Cicero's family was very tied to the church in both their current family system and historically in their families of origin. While for the most part, church was constructed as a supportive influence, Cicero found a degree of hypocrisy in his church experience. While he wasn't harassed per se in church, he found his peers took a different stance toward him as a gay youth outside of that setting. "The same kids that went to church would also go to my high school, and some of them, I could hear them say something at school." Tatiana experienced a peer's influence around church a bit differently. For a period of time she described how a peer drew her toward religion and the church to the point where she wanted to be baptized because as her mother put it, "I guess whatever your friend was feeding you, that you want to go to heaven." In contrast to Cicero's family, Tatiana's family, while letting her make her own decision, were noticeably opposed to this involvement. Talking to her daughter about the issue her mother encouraged Tatiana to think and question. "Just don't take what your neighbor is saying because she's embedded in the church and follow that. Think about it. ...Think about religion as a whole, what is being said, what is coming across to you."

Experiences of external marginalization were not confined to the youth in the study. At times, these were collective experiences. Yasai, his mother, and his partner described going out to dinner together and getting “looks” from patrons at other tables. Tatiana relayed similar stories about when she goes out in public with her girlfriend. “If my girlfriend and I go out ... we don’t hold hands, I mean cause you’re already getting stared at enough for the fact that you don’t look like a normal girl because my girlfriend looks extremely butch.” Parents also shared experiences where they had experienced or feared marginalization because they had a gay child. Tatiana’s mother relayed stories of friends who conveyed feelings of sympathy toward her when they found out that Tatiana was dating women. Cicero’s mom shared that she didn’t feel safe talking about her son in her workplace. “I don’t feel free to talk about Cicero as a gay man in my workplace. I don’t feel I can confide in my colleagues. I’m not sure if it would be safe to do that.” In these situations, parents, much like their children, chose to be out regarding their sons’ or daughters’ sexualities or keep that knowledge closeted. Also like their sons and daughters, social safety was a determinant of openness.

Supportive Family Relationships

Concern for one another in the participant families, particularly concern from parents for their children, was systemic with experiences of marginalization regardless of the source. Across all families, concern for one another was expressed and perceived among family members. Youth spoke of awareness and understanding of their impact on their parents and siblings, while parents spoke of protective factors and advocacy on behalf of their gay, bisexual, and queer sons and daughters. Discourse around this

subtheme will explore those processes that underlie the families' constructions of concerns and support.

Constructions of support and supportive relationships in the participant families varied based on a variety of contextual features. Families with different types and levels of resources, physical, organizational, and emotional, were able to show support for each other in different ways. Yasai's mother for example recognized the difficulty her son experienced in her home at the hands of her husband, Yasai's stepfather. As she put it, "he can't stand gays and he don't care who tells it." While she contended that she "always backed up the kids" and was willing to "stand up for them" in relation to her husband, she also expressed a desire to change the situation in her home but expressed some difficulty in making that change happen. "I'm trying to get the situation so I can get him out of my life, but you can't do that if you don't have a nickel in the pot." Despite this lack of financial resources, the family still seemed to be able to create supportive spaces. Yasai's partner seemed to have a pivotal role in the creation of this family space. The home that Yasai shared with his partner, where the family interviews were conducted, offered a place for the family to come together and interact without the threat and intimidation that Yasai and his mother experienced at home. The family had also found PFLAG (Parents & Friends of Lesbians and Gays) in their community, which was becoming a source of support for Yasai, his partner, and his mother as they began attending meetings together. When Yasai was asked about support in the final interview, he referred to his mother saying, "Just parts of it were supportive, like how she said she had to learn to accept it and stuff." Yasai's statement suggests that just the mere effort

his mother made to “learn to accept” him felt supportive to him despite all the harassment and victimization that he had experienced as a gay youth.

Like Yasai, Alison relayed experiences of internal or within family marginalization over the course of the interviews. Just as Yasai found support from specific components of his family system, his mother and his partner, Alison also seemed to seek out different things from different subsystems within her family. While Alison constructed her relationship with her mother as supportive to a degree, the expressions of support she described were seemingly more often laden with conditions. Alison recalled statements from her mother such as “if you grow up and you're attracted to women, that's okay, but it's going to be a much harder life for you” and “I know you're in this relationship, but I still love you, and I'm always going to support you.” Despite elements of support in these statements, the underlying sentiment as Alison described it seems to be that “her worse fear is that I'm incurably not going to be attracted to men ever.” Alison's father, on the other hand, offered her support with no conditions or judgments attached. He and Alison spoke frequently about judgment and her father conveyed the sentiment that judging others is “always destructive.” Discussing what he termed “homosexuality,” her father emphasized the importance of “accepting each person just exactly the way they are...and loving them for it.” This statement seemed to sum up the type of support that Alison's father extended to his daughter, which in many ways served as a dichotomy to what she received from her mother. From this discussion, the systemic nature of marginalization and support in Alison's family becomes apparent. Relationally, depending on the subsystem in which she was navigating, Alison may have found support tempered with conditions or support with no strings or apparent structure. As a reflective

and insightful young woman, Alison had learned to navigate in this system in order to have her needs met.

Part of the manner in which Alison navigated this aspect of her family system was to engage in a pattern of reciprocal support. Having dealt with aspects of addiction and depression in her family, Alison constructed ways to make meaning out of her parents' needs for support in relation to her own. Stigmatized for different reasons, Alison found support from her parents within their individual contexts of marginalization. For her mother, Alison fulfilled a supportive role as a parenting proxy and confidant while she stood by her father through his addiction. She found support from her mother by placing her comments and actions in the context of her mother's past experiences. "I have trouble figuring out why she hasn't come to similar conclusions about being non-judgmental and about how valuable love is, particularly after having such like a hectic, crazy family life for her entire life." Alison expressed almost an entitlement to her father's support based on the lengths she had gone to in order to support him. "If you were judgmental with me I would have to be really pissed," Alison told her father. This sense of entitlement was also present in a different way with Yasai, who also at times expressed a demand for acceptance and equity from others. Also like Alison and her father, Yasai's relationship with his mother had a depth and reciprocity of care and support.

Supportive relationships, while very present in Tatiana's and Cicero's families, were constructed differently. As discussed in the previous theme, *Family Connections*, the structure of these two family systems dictated the way in which relationships and relationship dynamics were developed. The same was true of supportive processes as

responses to incidents and feelings of marginalization. Cicero's negative experiences in school provide an example of how his parents provided support in light of the harassment and isolation he experienced. As Cicero relayed these experiences, frequently his father would follow up with an explanation of the action he took as a parent. This often meant seeking out support from school administrators and counselors in order to identify potential solutions and remedies to the issues his son presented. His father seemed to build a bridge from the family to the community, extending the family's support into those external settings where Cicero needed it most. The foundation of these processes seemed to be communication in the family. Beginning with Cicero's willingness to confide in his parents and his parents' willingness to act as a coalition on behalf of their son, the family was able to address incidents and feelings of marginalization as a cohesive unit.

This cohesiveness is also true of Tatiana's family. For Tatiana, systems of support were built into the blueprint of her family. As with Cicero, communication was at the core of these systems. Tatiana proudly shared, "I tell my parents everything pretty much." This openness was by design. "And what I tried to impart of Tatiana, was you need to tell us, you need to share. If something happens we'll work it out, we'll work through it." As in Cicero's family, in this statement Tatiana's mother outlined a protocol of support which begins with her daughter being open about problems and issues. Like their acceptance of their daughter's sexuality, support in Tatiana's family was seamless. Her parents were protective of their daughter's well being and intervened in supportive ways if they felt she was being mistreated. Her mother shared that "a couple of times there's been some issue of conflict with [us and Tatiana's] girlfriend...because we feel

she hasn't respected her in the way we want her to be respected and treated." Respect for their children is something that both Tatiana's and Cicero's parents demonstrated not only within the family system but externally as well. Tatiana's mother described incidences when she has directly confronted friends and colleagues regarding their attitudes towards gays. Cicero's father has served as an advocate in his workplace and in the family's community. Both families shared their increased awareness of gay rights as a result of having a gay child in their family.

Queering the System

Increased awareness is one of several ways in which the gay youth in this study impacted their families. The third cross case theme, *Queering the System*, is comprised of discourse regarding the ways in which the family system changed as the result of having a gay, bisexual, or queer youth as a member. For some families in the study, this was based on a disclosure event, which may or may not have been anticipated. For other families queerness became part of the scope of development for their child. In whatever way the youth came out to their respective families, the impact of that open acknowledgement seemed to transform individual members of the family as well as the family as a whole. As attitudes, beliefs, and values shifted within the families, relationships and expectations also changed. Having a gay child or sibling and sometimes the addition of a same-sex partner or significant other had a transformational effect on the family systems being explored. As a whole, the families developed new patterns of interaction, rules around communication, and changes in their constructions and meanings about family. The subthemes supporting this theme are *Queered Relational Processes*, *Same-sex Partnerships*, and *Queered Family Lifecycle*.

Queered Relational Processes

The disclosure event or coming out experience in itself became a relational process that served to disturb the typical family discourse around a variety of topics in the four participant families. Reactions ranged from Yasai's mother who withdrew and closed off communication to Tatiana's parents who seemed to move seamlessly toward accepting their daughter. Despite the initial reaction, learning and making meaning out of their child's sexuality challenged every family to communicate in different ways, about new topics, and to engage in a process of adaptation. While for some participants this adaptation was not necessarily expected and was potentially unwanted, other families engaged in the process with an open and accepting stance.

Alison's family began to engage in conversations with their daughter about sexuality and gender at an early age. Alison recalled conversations as early as age four with her mother and her father recalled observing gender related clues that he constructed as indicative of Alison's sexuality at age three. Based on these gender clues the family began to consider the idea that their daughter might not be heterosexual and began to create discourse around that idea. "I was a very boyish four year old," Alison prefaced her recollection of an early conversation with her mother. "She sat me down at one point and said, if you grow up and you're attracted to women, that's okay, but it's going to be a much harder life for you." Because of her perception of her daughter's sexuality, Alison's mother began talking to her daughter about sexual attraction very early in her life. Inherent in this conversation were her mother's processes of reconstructing her vision of her daughter's and her family's future and perhaps an attempt to preserve what it would mean for her to have a heterosexual daughter rather than a queer one.

Like Alison, Cicero also had a salient impact on communication processes in his family. He broached the topic of his sexuality with his father as a young man prior to disclosing his sexual orientation to either of his parents. "I forget exactly how I worded it. The answer was something to the effect that he guessed he would be okay with having a gay son." This event, along with other "clues" that his parents had been aware of, seemed to lay the groundwork for a new dialogue around sexuality and relationships in Cicero's family. Cicero's parents discussed how they began to talk about their son's sexuality in a different way as they came to understand him as a gay youth. In addition to creating rules for communication with Cicero's brothers as previously discussed, the queering effect on communication became extended into Cicero's parents' families of origin. "And it took a while for us to be free to talk about with our parents. Certainly telling Cicero's dad's parents was easier...they had guessed. I'd been a little worried about telling my parents." Having a gay youth in their family not only had an impact on relationships in the immediate family system, but also rippled out to the extended family as well as to future generations through Cicero and his brothers.

Like communication, socialization processes offer a second example of how interactions were changed after the four youth came out to their families. The families provided typical examples of parents socializing children in terms of behavior. Yasai's mother mentioned several times that she tried to teach Yasai and his brother to be respectful in their language and actions. Tatiana's parents conveyed an intentional effort to teach their daughter how to engage in family interactions appropriately. The coming out event or the increasing awareness that there was a gay child in the family began to shift or queer these processes away from what might be considered traditional parent to

child socialization. When discussing gay symbols, Yasai made his mother aware that the “rainbow” was a long accepted symbol in gay culture. Tatiana’s family also related ways in which their daughter taught them about gay life and culture. “I feel like you have learned some culture because you ask questions about certain things. ...And I’ve explained what it means when you dress butch and a butch dates a fem.” Cicero’s family shared that having a gay son had raised their awareness “in a more personal way” and his mother shared that her son’s willingness “to share his enjoyment of his partner...has been reassuring and helpful.” Alison’s father connected with what his daughter had taught him on a seemingly deep level. “I mean, it’s obvious. I’m 56 years old, and I wish I could as comfortable with myself as Alison is, and she’s 22. And I don’t think I need to say any more about that. Period. Inspiration.” This statement suggests that Alison’s dad has learned about himself through knowing his queer daughter. Perhaps within the context of his addiction, Alison’s father identified with his daughter’s marginal social position or simply admired her courage and ability to accept herself unconditionally. Alison’s father perceived his daughter as inspirational, wanting to be like her. Queering the family system, Alison by her very being had a positive impact on her parent.

The new ways of knowing and the new things to know described above are indicative of the unique adjustment process that all four families described. The ways in which families made meaning out of having a gay youth in their family pulled on multiple relational dimensions. Yasai’s mother’s reaction to the call from his school revealed the level of dissonance the disclosure caused. “Oh I sat in the corner and rocked. ...Extremely disturbing. It didn’t seem to bother me if somebody else was gay but it wasn’t in my family yet.” Cicero’s father echoed this sentiment. “It wasn’t a

matter of being happy or unhappy...it was more a matter of adjusting.” These comments suggest that the coming out experience, regardless of the nature and source of the disclosure, initiated a process of change in which the families began to understand themselves differently. Cicero’s mother stated, “I just had to readjust everything” and her husband discussed new rules around family interactions. “As my wife alluded to earlier, at that time maybe the more difficult thing was thinking about how that works with the overall family in terms of Cicero’s brothers.”

Tatiana’s and Alison’s families’ experiences were in contrast to the experiences of Cicero’s and Yasai’s families in terms of adjustment processes. In Alison’s case, the adjustment seemed to occur over time as sexuality and gender entered the realm of family interaction early on in Alison’s life. Tatiana’s parents described their experiences as similar to this. Her father characterized the adjustment process as a “natural progression of our and more specifically her life.” He went on to say, “We accept her when she wanted to play basketball and when she wanted to play guitar and when she wanted to date girls.” While this attitude of acceptance seems seamless and fitting in terms of the way the family constructed their relationships, Tatiana’s version of her coming out story did suggest that her disclosure may have presented her parents with some pause. She shared that after she told her parents she wanted to date her female friend, her father immediately asked, “so does that mean you’re a lesbian?” Here Tatiana’s dad instinctively seemed to turn to dominant discourse on sexuality in order to understand his daughter in terms of her social and sexual status. This particular critique, however, is not congruent with Tatiana’s or her parents’ constructions of their relationship processes or experiences as a family of a gay youth.

Same-sex Partnerships

Same-sex partners had a significant impact on the family systems being explored in the study. Two participants, Alison and Yasai, included their partners in the family interviews. Cicero and Tatiana as well as their parents both made reference to partners over the course of our discussions. While in all four families the presence of a same-sex partner disturbed the view of the families' futures, the influence of the youths' partners seemed overwhelmingly positive.

Yasai's relationship with his partner in particular seemed to create new relational opportunities for him and his mother. Yasai's mother spoke several times about how she constructed her son as being safe with his partner. She said of her son's partner "I love him like a son" and added that she appreciated the fact that Yasai's partner was older and that he "tones Yasai down a little bit." His mother's statement suggests that the protection the partnership offers from social victimization is of importance to her. Responding to a news story about violence directed toward gays, his mother said, "I'm very concerned. I'm not as concerned with Yasai's partner, because he doesn't flaunt like Yasai does," suggesting that his partner somehow lessens or draws attention away from what she constructed as her son's feminine behaviors. In addition to this degree of protection, Yasai's partner also seemed to provide an opportunity for Yasai and his mother to experience a different kind of family system. His partner constructed his family of origin as one characterized by close family connections and traditions. Yasai and his mother spoke favorably about these traditions in which they had started to participate and the relationships they had begun to forge with his partner's extended family.

Cicero's partner was described and constructed in a very important way to his family. With such a strong emphasis on coupling in the family, Cicero's partnership was a means for him to fit into that particular family "tradition." The family discussed how their constructions of a couple as male and female, what Cicero's father termed "the traditional sense," had changed due to Cicero's current relationship. His mother spoke of how the definition of a couple had "changed" and "expanded" for her. She gave her son an open invitation to bring his partner into the family circle, an invitation which Cicero described as very meaningful and important to him. "Cicero, when he's ready, I'm ready. I'm ready to extend the circle." Cicero shared his reaction in his third individual interview. "It was really, really good when my mom said something about being ready to open our family circle to my partner, that was really amazing." Through his relationship with his partner, Cicero seemed to have found a means to not only connect with his family, but feel their acceptance in a different way.

Alison's and Tatiana's families experienced their same-sex partnerships a bit differently. For Alison, her relationship with her girlfriend was constructed as central to many of her conversations with her mother about sexuality. Alison expressed her desire for her mother to meet her girlfriend and accept that she had found a loving and supportive partner. Alison expressed frustration at her mother's inability or unwillingness to do this. Alison in an almost pleading way described an interaction with her mother about meeting her girlfriend. "I know [you'll still love me] that's not the point, I want you to meet this person. Aren't you going to like ask what she's like or whatever?" In her descriptions, Alison often seemed to convey that her same-sex

relationship made her desire and attractions for women valid and real, a symbol to her family, particularly her mother, of who she was as an individual.

Tatiana's same-sex relationship also was the source of family conflict as well as influence but in somewhat different terms than the other family participants. As her mother described it, Tatiana's relationship tapped into some of her parents' concerns over their daughter's safety and protection. "We feel she hasn't respected [Tatiana] the way we want her to be respected and treated." Tatiana described the differences in her girlfriend's relationship with her family, which had often resulted in conflict with Tatiana and her parents. "She grew up in a family where you didn't talk about anything. ...So for her to see the way that we interacted, it kind of freaked her out I feel like." As Tatiana described, the relational processes in her family became the source of conflict in her personal relationship. While in other cases the youth's same-sex partner somehow influenced the relationships in the youth's family, Tatiana's account is the opposite. Instead of her girlfriend having an impact on her family relationships Tatiana described her family's influence on relationships for her girlfriend. "Well I don't know if I'd say it's impacted our relationship, but I feel like it's helped her and her family's relationship because she sees the way we interact and we can actually act like a family and talk."

Queered Family Lifecycle

The impact of having a gay youth as a member of their families had a broader impact on the participants. While specific relational processes such as adjustment were queered and same-sex partnerships influenced constructions of family these factors culminated in an impact on the family lifecycles of the participant families. Having a gay child in the family not only influenced current ways of relating, but shifted constructions

of family legacies, and changed the families views of their futures. These shifts and changes are representative of the ways in which gay youth queered their family systems.

When Cicero's mother posited that having a gay son resulted in the need to "readjust everything" much of her adjustment processes had to do with her vision of her family's future. She described how accepting her gay son meant potentially giving up a desire to have a "daughter [in law], and granddaughters, and grandchildren." She shared that "adjusting to that and accepting that took some time." Yasai's mother expressed a similar sentiment. "I wanted him to grow up, find a woman, have some babies, cause they'd be so cute. And I realize that's not gonna happen." Alison and Tatiana also received similar messages. Alison described the prospect of her not having children as a "horrible, horrible tragedy" for her mother. "I guess in [my mother's] fantasy world...the ideal thing would be of course for me to marry a guy that I really, really cared about and then to raise kids with him." Yasai disputed his mother's contention that he would not have children suggesting to her that one day he would adopt. Cicero's mother came around to a new vision of her son's and her family's future during the course of the interview. "Well, I still see Cicero as a very nurturing kind of person. That part of him has not changed. ...So that idea that I had...that you could not be a father, that may not be true at all." For Cicero's mom "extending the circle" to her son's same-sex partner and welcoming the idea that they may have children was a different way for her to think about family, and make meaning out of the family she began by describing as "traditional."

Although Tatiana had received messages about marriage as a girl, her mother stated quite emphatically that grandchildren were not an expectation. "I didn't have you

to have grandchildren. If it ended here with our family line, then that's where it ends. And so be it. It's just the way it is." Rather than focused on continuing the "family line," the expectations in Tatiana's family were decidedly relational in nature. Tatiana's family described themselves as "close knit" and as having a "deep rooted sense of family." They described these characteristics as "core values," which her dad felt "haven't changed at all" over time. Constructing the future of the family for Tatiana's family had less to do with grandchildren and partnering and more to do with maintaining cohesion and connections with each other. Discussions of maintaining connections were much less matter of fact and more oriented toward feelings, particularly for Tatiana's father. In reference to his daughter graduating from college and moving away from the family, he shared, "I make no bones about the fact that I do miss the daughter. I don't hide the fact that I do love my daughter a lot. I miss her when she's not around." With such a strong value for cohesion, Tatiana's mother stated that she felt the family's connections to one another would be maintained despite physical proximity. "The future's too hard to predict, it is what it's gonna be, but I just don't see the dynamic of the family changing. I still don't see [distance] changing the structure." The vision of Tatiana's future was to maintain the dynamic they had established as part of their family life so far. As her mother stated early on in the interview process, this enduring dynamic by design was to ensure that Tatiana "always felt like she had someone there for her."

Despite the various ways in which their parents envisioned the future of their families, each youth described their own hopes for their future. Yasai discussed his desire to enter nursing school and pursue that career field. Tatiana discussed her future in terms of her girlfriend and their plans together. "Ideally we would, at this point, probably

still try to live together somewhere while I go to grad school, so wherever she can get a job.” Alison too was about to enter a career field with plans to carry on a family legacy of “social justice,” a belief system that she learned from her parents. Speaking of her goals, Alison’s father proudly described his daughter’s ability have an impact on society. “I strongly believe that this young woman is not just tippy-toeing in that direction, but everything about her seems to be moving that way....I’m real proud of her.” In addition to these career and personal goals, all four youth incorporated a notion of family, whether it be partnerships, children, or both, into their constructions of their futures.

Family Resilience

The ways in which families maintain connectedness, battle marginalization, employ protective factors, and engage in queered relational processes culminate in the fourth and final cross case theme. The relational processes that comprise the family system determine whether the family can remain cohesive and combat vertical and horizontal stressors inherent in the community and the lifecycle of the family. Accounts of both types of stressors are present in the data as the families described how their lives changed after the disclosure or realization that their son or daughter was gay. The subthemes that comprise *Family Resilience* are *Horizontal Stressors*, *Vertical Stressors*, and *Relational Resilience*.

Horizontal Stressors

Derived from theory, horizontal stressors are those that occur along the continuum of the family lifecycle (Carter & McGoldrick, 2005). These stressors are present within the interior of the family system and are frequently represented as specific events, sometimes crisis points, over the course of time. Several of these events were present in

the current data and varied from family to family. Yasai described physical moves which had an impact on his development and the relationships in his family. Both his family and Alison's family had experienced divorce and remarriage of at least one parent. For Yasai's and Tatiana's mothers, the experience of adoption informed their constructions of family and parenting. Tatiana's and Cicero's families both spoke of incidents related to sending their children off to college.

Despite these commonalities and differences, the one event or phenomenon that all of the participant families constructed in the data was the experience of coming out and making meaning of their child as a gay youth. This event not only sets all four participant families apart from families of heterosexual youth, but also initiated unique experiences with dissonance and adjustment processes. These processes were evident in the presentation of previous themes and were largely tied to the relational processes that existed within the family system. Established relational patterns, whether they were protective, cohesive, or disaffecting were applied to the experience of making meaning of sexuality in these families of gay youth. Yasai's family, with a history of estrangement, recapitulated that pattern in the throes of the coming out experience. His mother, who admittedly "kept people at arms length," described how she withdrew and disconnected after learning that her son was gay. In contrast, Cicero's and Tatiana's families, who constructed themselves as highly cohesive and connected, closed ranks and sought to understand and make meaning out of the realization. Cicero's parents spoke of resorting to those resources that were typical for each of them. Cicero's father "as an academic" read books and his mother found support through a feminist group affiliated with her church. Both Tatiana's and Cicero's families relied on open communication patterns that

they had already established. In this shared experience, more than mere reactions but established ways of relating and interacting informed and characterized how families proceeded to know each other and understand each other differently.

This different knowing and understanding within the four families was constructed in the data as aspects of adjustment. The youth in the study all alluded to the idea that self understanding was a parallel process to meaning making in the family. Alison's process of understanding herself took place over the course of years. She, like Tatiana, tried out different constructions and iterations of identity and identifying. For their families, adjustment was again reflective of established relational processes. Alison's family's experience, informed by the dynamics of addiction and divorce, resulted in two polarized parental perspectives. Tatiana's, like Cicero's family, in the context of a cohesive and aligned parental subsystem, presented a unified voice of acceptance in response to its children's disclosures. Yasai's family, with a internal context characterized by uncertainty and crisis, was able to reconnect in much the same way that their estrangement occurred. Just as the crisis that resulted from Yasai's family learning that he was gay resulted in isolation, a medical crisis with his mother resulted in a renewed connection and acceptance for Yasai.

Despite different stories and contexts, the relational processes present in each of the four families informed the manner in which they not only reacted to learning that they had a gay child in their family, but also the ways in which they came to understand the meaning of that phenomenon.

Vertical Stressors

The second subtheme, *Vertical Stressors*, is also borrowed from family development theory and is comprised of those stressors external to the family (Carter & McGoldrick, 2005). For the families in this study, salient vertical stressors were indicative of negative social views towards gay individuals and groups. These social views and resulting discriminatory practices were disruptive to participant families in multiple ways. For some, discrimination and harassment based on anti-gay social sentiment occurred outside of the family system in schools, churches, and the community. For others, such as Yasai's family, these practices became part of the family system, and dominant negative social beliefs were present in his home and among his family. Alison's perceptions of the messages she received from her mother also seemed reflective of negative social views which were allowed to seep into family relationships. For Cicero and Tatiana, the same degree of influence from social discourse was not present. Their parents actively disputed such rhetoric and created a relational boundary between those social messages maintaining the strong relational foundation that they had created for their children and their families.

Combating vertical stressors was evidenced in several forms among the participant families. Cicero's father described several occasions in which he addressed incidents of discrimination toward his son directly, particularly with school administrators and personnel. Discussing one such incident in middle school, Cicero and his father discussed how the principal responded well to the harassment that Cicero encountered from his peers in class. "[The principal] talked to us and then sent us a letter and I thought he handled that very well." Cicero's dad also investigated campus

resources on his son's behalf. He shared that he contacted Cicero's college counseling center and "asked some leading questions about what kind of resources and what the climate of the campus was and I thought she was very honest with me." Tatiana's parents were also keenly aware of their daughter's experiences and advocated for her among their peers and in their community. Tatiana's mother described instances when she very readily confronted friends regarding inaccurate assumptions based on stereotypes.

For Tatiana and Cicero, boundaries between the family and vertical stressors seemed strong. In Yasai's and Alison's families, these boundaries were more diffuse. Although concerns were expressed, neither Yasai's nor Alison's families constructed protective factors as they were constructed in the other two families. Like Cicero, Yasai experienced harassment at school, but as he and his mother described, at some points this harassment was at the hands of his brother. While Tatiana described feeling marginalized when she was out in public with her girlfriend, Alison described similar marginalization from within her family system. Alison also shared that she was learning how and when to implement boundaries in her relationship with her father as they related to his addictive behavior. "It's been good for me to try to figure out when I shouldn't put up with certain things, and like when I do need to step back, and when I can be there in a way that's different." The lack of boundaries and structure within these two family systems seemed to support relational processes that allowed vertical stressors to take hold. The ways in which supportive processes were characterized for Alison's and Yasai's families did not seem to be adequate to withstand the pressures pressing in on the family from the exterior.

Relational Resilience

Based on the manner in which participant families constructed their experiences, their abilities to cope with both horizontal and vertical stressors seemed dependent on and situated within family relational processes. These processes seem particularly important for gay youth and their families given the unique nature of horizontal stressors such as the coming out experience and the pervasiveness of negative social discourse regarding their status. These two factors made the impact of relational processes in the participant families noteworthy. In these families, the coming out experience presents a crucial point as it initiates important internal adjustment processes while inviting potentially negative external messages. For the families in the study, the way in which relational processes were constructed plotted a course for the ways in which adjustment would occur and social messages would be received.

Cicero's family, like Tatiana's, relied on a high degree of structure when faced with both types of family stressors. Whether stress was derived from internal or external sources, both family systems relied on their orientations toward cohesiveness and communication. For Cicero, problems at school or at church could be brought to the family where he would be supported in finding solutions and alternatives. His parents took on the role of collaborative problem solvers and often created bridges between the security of the family system and those other social institutions and systems in which their son was involved. Like Cicero, Tatiana, who communicated very openly and frequently with her parents, found that she could share even difficult aspects of her life, such as conflicts with her girlfriend, with her parents and find safety within her family. Her mother and father expressed concerns for her as a young person, a woman, and a

non-heterosexual individual, and created a family that was designed as a source of support so “she always felt like she had someone there for her.”

In contrast to this openness and sharing, Yasai and Alison had more difficulty turning to their families when faced with feelings related to their sexuality and attractions, and to incidents of social victimization. The way in which relational processes were structured in Yasai’s family system, that victimization was reenacted by family members. While Yasai’s mother was supportive, she seemed to feel helpless to do what needed to be done to change the pattern of victimization for her and her son. Speaking about wanting to change these relational patterns in her family, his mother stated, “you can’t do that if you don’t have a nickel in the pot.” This statement provides a salient illustration of the impact of vertical stressors on the family system and the impact of those stressors on family relationships. Still, in the data Yasai and his mother constructed their relationships as close and conveyed the importance of their connectedness.

Like Yasai, Alison found marginalization in some family relationships, while she found profound acceptance in others. Of living as part of her family system, Alison said that she had developed toughness. “I’ve always felt that I was pretty resilient or tough emotionally.” Although Alison’s family was the only one to label themselves as “resilient,” the term seemed applicable across all four families. Responding to his daughter, Alison’s father didn’t find the term conveyed the appropriate depth of meaning. “When I think of resilience, I think of, you hang in there, you just keep bouncing back. Well, yeah, there’s that, but it’s really not that. It’s really a transformation for a whole different perceptual field.” The insight Alison’s father offered in this statement seems

relevant to the families in the study, who were all transformed by their experiences as families of gay youth. Understanding themselves as part of the phenomenon that this study engaged in exploring, the participant families not only shared instances of individual and personal transformation, but also deep systemic changes in their emic and etic perspectives as a family.

For the families of gay youth in the present study, relational processes became more than mere dynamics between family members comprised of reactions, perceptions, and ways of relating. For these families, relational process became means for coping with past, present, and future stressors that somehow became incorporated into experiences of sexuality. The four family participants illustrated this relational phenomenon as they described the differing ways in which they met challenges, negotiated conflict, discovered new ways of thinking and feeling, and maintained connections despite adversity. Through relationships of all types and dimensions the families in this study demonstrated resilience through their relationships. The families of gay, bisexual, and queer youth as constructed here are existing and finding ways to thrive in family systems that are coping with more than having a child who is not heterosexual. These youth and their families live in systems of dependence and self determination, mistreatment and protection, persecution and empowerment, pain and joy.

Chapter Summary

The discourse presented above is the result of a constant comparative method of qualitative data analysis, which resulted in four cross case themes. These themes not only contain interpreted elements of the socially constructed relational processes of four families of gay youth, but also integrate elements of family development theory and

queer theory into the discussion and interpretation of each thematic element. The themes move the reader through a progression of complexity from a basic focus on family relationships, to the ways in which those relationships are compensatory, to a queer rubric for family change. The final theme is a culmination of the relational processes inherent in all the themes discussed prior to it. *Family Resilience* comes full circle as it incorporates adjustment processes and other relational systems back into connection and cohesiveness. The interconnection of these cross case themes is a reminder of the systemic nature of family relationships and the transformational power of those processes of which they are comprised.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

Chapter Four provided a glimpse into the lived experiences of four families illustrated through the use of their own words and delineated by within case themes. This initial reduction of the data was further refined and recounted in Chapter Five, where cross case themes were reported. These themes represented the collective voice of the family participants. The current chapter will return to the original purpose of the study and supporting research questions in order to offer a discussion of how the data and subsequent themes serve to provide responses to the issues that sparked this current inquiry. In addition to addressing the original research questions, additional findings will be discussed along with limitations and directions for future research. Implications for the fields of family counseling and counselor education will also be posited. Finally, a personal statement from the researcher will conclude this chapter and the manuscript.

Return to the Research Problem

Chapters One and Two of this manuscript outline the literature regarding the cultural victimization of gay youth. In the most basic terms, gay youth in the U.S. are suffering. Much of this suffering is due to cultural factors that relegate these young people to the margins of the social field by sending messages that evoke shame, helplessness, and isolation. These messages also impact the family system by asserting prescriptive regimes regarding parenting practices and acceptable outcomes. Researchers writing in this area of inquiry contend that families are constrained by socialized belief systems which shape reactions to gay children and that these social messages can

recapitulate societal oppression within the family system (Green, 2002). On the other hand, theories of family development suggest that embeddedness in a family system serves and fosters the development of adolescents into adulthood, and that relational content is central to structural and affective patterns in family systems (Stone-Fish & Harvey, 2005).

Taking these concepts in concert, one recognizes the tension between the social factors that shape the family system and the relational factors of that very system that shape the lives of adolescents. For gay youth, the resolution of this tension may be the difference between thriving and suffering from cultural victimization. The dichotomous tension between the family and the larger society not only gives a greater degree of depth to the problem, but also suggests potential means to seek resolution.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the relational processes of families of gay youth. The goal of this investigation was to explore these processes, gain a sense of families' experiences, and come to better understand the meaning families make of their relationships, particularly as they relate to having a child, sibling, grandchild, etc. who is gay. The goal was not to draw objective conclusions, but rather to accurately convey an understanding of the lived experience of family relationships. In order to achieve this goal the current study posed specific research questions.

According to Stake (2003), case study research within the qualitative tradition is conceptualized around questions that address a particular issue or set of issues, described as "complex, situated, and problematic relationships" (p. 142). The author suggests since qualitative research is oriented toward understanding complexities, that research

questions should not be solely constructed for informational purposes but instead should reflect “thematic lines” which relate to the issue at hand. The issues that comprise the proposed study are three-fold. First, the relational aspects of these intact family systems have not been explored in existing research. In addition, risk factors among gay youth are related to family support (D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). Therefore, research questions were designed to explore those ways in which supportive processes occur within these family systems. Finally, research has determined that social factors have an influence on family functioning (Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Baptist, 2002). Questions regarding this issue were designed to obtain information regarding how families of gay youth view themselves in the greater social context. Based on this discussion, the current research posed the following questions:

1. How do parents and gay youth make meaning of their experiences as a family?
 - How does having a gay family member impact their process of making meaning?
 - What are their perceptions of their past, present, and future?
 - How is the family lifecycle constructed differently?
2. How is emotional expression characterized in families of gay youth before and after coming out?
 - What are the communication patterns in families of gay youth?
 - How does communication change after the youth’s disclosure?
 - What types of emotions are expressed?
 - What emotions go unexpressed?
3. What social factors impact the process of family meaning making?

- What social concerns exist for the family?
- What experiences of discrimination, if any, has the family experienced?
- How do religious beliefs and practices influence meaning making?

Each of the three primary questions will be answered within the scope and context of the data collected from the four family participants. The sub-questions will be addressed topically within each response section. Following each of these responses will be a discussion of how the findings of this study relate to the current knowledge of the research problem both in terms of research and theory. Due to the limited generalizability of the results of the study, as dictated by the paradigm selected, these comparisons with previous literature will remain tied to the specific nature of those experiences discovered and inherent in the current findings.

Question 1

How do parents and gay youth make meaning of their experiences as a family?

Based on the analysis of data from this study, meaning making in families of gay youth is shaped by a variety of factors and evident not only in the self concept of individual members, but also in the collective concept of the family and their ideas of their past, present, and future. Each family in the study constructed a process of collective identification in which they first reflected themselves in their families of origin, situated themselves in the present as families of gay youth, and reconstructed their vision of their future based on their present family status. For some parents this reflection resulted in a rejection of their childhood experiences and became a catalyst for the intentional construction of different relational process. Other families in the study constructed more literal reflections of family of origin experience whether grounded in

frameworks such as marriage, commitment, and spirituality, or a legacy of violence, abuse, and rejection. Despite the nature of family history, intergenerational messages informed meaning making in the present family systems.

The present family systems, although conveying some common ground of experiences, were also constructed in diverse and unique ways. The process of making meaning occurred differently for each family in terms of time and occasion. Alison's family, for example, began the process of meaning making early in their daughter's life. Understanding in her family developed through parent-child communication and the incorporation of past experiences as well as messages from outside of the family system. Frequently, meaning making began prior to the youth's disclosure or outing, and was constructed in developmental terms or around clues and suspicions. Typically based on appearance and behaviors, these clues started the process of making meaning of not only their non-heterosexual child, but also their families. With no precedence of discourse within families of origin, families in the study did not discuss sexuality outside of heterosexual constructions. Therefore, social stereotypes and biases around non-heterosexualities were present in families' constructions of meaning regardless of whether understanding was initiated via a single incident or over time.

Meaning making in the participant families was also impacted by a variety of contextual features that were operating independent of their experiences of their children's sexualities. These features included deliberate constructions of family configurations and planned numbers of children as well as familial educational and career patterns. Additional factors such as substance use and addiction, personalized forms of abuse, and experiences of depression were present in the collection of cases present in the

study. These aspects of context contributed to perceptions, role definitions, and future expectations of both youth and parents. Illustrating the complexity and relatedness of various aspects of meaning making in these families, these aspects and features were often constructed as present in families of origin thus becoming generational transmissions of context that did not define, but certainly informed knowledge and understanding of sexuality. The implication that is derived from these particular constructions is that families of gay youth are making meaning of more than just being a family of a gay youth. While the sexuality of a child becomes part of the family context, that child is also embedded in the family context. Family meaning making for the participants in this study comprised more than just having a gay child in the family, but rather having a gay child in a family experiencing addiction, a legacy of abusive behavior, multiple children, or only one child. The experience of having a gay youth as part of a family system cannot be isolated from the multitude of other contextual elements. Sexuality, sexual orientation, and the meanings of both constructs comprised only one aspect of the collective experiences of the families in this study.

The process of meaning making for the participant families was also relational and constructed around adjustment processes, which were often shaped by the contextual features previously discussed. Parent participants described how the direct knowledge of the children's sexualities, regardless of how it was received, initiated change in the way they thought about their families. The future of the family became one area that was consistently reconstructed across participants, as parents from all four families constructed their children's futures within a framework of heterosexual marriage with children. During the interviews these constructions were debated and pulled apart as gay

youth discussed how the goals of partnership and parenting might look for them. These debates presently and historically were indicative of the manner in which relational process were generally characterized in the family, whether they be open or inhibited communication, closeness or estrangement, conditional or unconditional regard. For all four families, adjustment was not an isolated nor stagnant occurrence. The meaning that emerged through adjustment in the four families was and continued as a process of learning and understanding not just on an individual level, but understanding each family member in relation to each other.

Meaning making through the process of learning in families was essentially bi-directional and did not always occur from parent to child. The presence of a gay youth in these families troubled or queered this process as parents moved into what was, for some, unfamiliar territory. All the parents in the study shared their knowing of individuals who were not heterosexual, but by the same token often expressed a difference between exposure and having a child who in these cases was gay, bisexual, or queer. While discussion among the families revealed those lessons that parents had imparted to their children, the data also indicated that parents were learning from their gay youth. The data illustrated how socialization was occurring in the participant families as parents learned about romantic and cultural aspects of gay or queer life in contrast to their knowledge and experiences identifying as heterosexual. The acquisition of new knowledge in this way was inherently process oriented, as parents often constructed their children's queer lives within known heterosexual relational frameworks such as coupling, commitment, and monogamy. Youth did not openly dispute these constructions during the data collection process. Whether this phenomenon was indicative of capitulation to

the dominant discourse on the part of the youth or perhaps an unwillingness to share certain aspects of their lives with their parents cannot be surmised.

Finally, for the youth in the study, self understanding often occurred as a parallel process to familial meaning making. Tatiana, for example, stated very directly that as she was trying to explain her sexuality to her parents she was in the processes of figuring it out for herself. The other youths in the study echoed this experience. This parallel process was observed during an interview when Cicero's mother described her new construction of Cicero's future as a parent. Her son responded that while he had come to understand this role as a possibility for himself, he hadn't decided if it was an experience that he fully desired. Cicero was still constructing a future as an adult gay man, a construction which could again become dissonant with his mother's notions of his life path. This potential for ongoing tension between individual and collective constructions within families is illustrative of the social constructive experience that was observed over the course of the research. An apparent interplay between assimilative and accommodative processes seemed evident as both parents and children strived for meaning. Thus, reality and identity were in turn created in the spaces in between family members and existed only as fluid and changeable processes. While the individual processes cannot be ignored, the collective systemic ones are where the meanings about family and sexuality truly lie.

Comparison to Literature

Previous research regarding gay youth and their families has also posited findings that relate to the experience of meaning making. Waldner and Magruder (1999), for example, tested a theoretical model of the coming out process for youth that is based on a

cost-benefit analysis. The factors involved in this analysis for gay youth included their perceptions of family relations, perceived resources outside of the family system, and expression of identity. In this study, the researchers found that youth made meaning out of their need to disclose based on their perceptions of family relations as well as the perceived availability of family resources. The current study marginally echoed these findings with some interesting contrasts. Youth participants either directly or indirectly spoke of their awareness of their parents feelings about sexuality, which were often constructed through perceptions of future expectations. All four families, whether expressed by the youth or the parent participants, discussed the expectation of heterosexual marriage. Tatiana, despite her perceptions of her parents' openness, still expressed apprehension about disclosing, as if weighing the cost and benefit as described by Waldner and Magruder (1999). Cicero made this analysis through asking his parents strategic questions as he prepared to make his disclosure. An important distinction, however, is that all of the youth in the current study, with the exception of Yasai, seemed to disclose for reasons other than benefit. While the cost-benefit analysis may have been a clear and present component of the phenomenon, all youth alluded to the fact that their parents knowing that they were gay, bisexual, or queer was important. This importance was not constructed around the harboring of false expectations or as a means of disrupting family stasis, but seemingly more in the genuineness of knowing. For parents in the study to know their children in this way seemed deeply relational in nature. The cost and benefit of youth initiating this knowing only scratches the surface of the experiences that families in the current study constructed.

Meaning making processes for parents were also present in previous research. Robinson, Walters, and Skeen (1989) as well as Ben Ari (1995) investigated parent reactions to a gay child's disclosure of his or her sexual orientation. Authors developed a model for these reactions that was based on the model of grief that was developed by Kubler-Ross (1969). Robinson et al. (1989) posited a model in which parent reactions were categorized across eight categories (shock, denial, shame, guilt, anger, rejection, acknowledgement, and acceptance), which Ben Ari (1995) then used to study parent reactions to disclosure at different points in time. Results from both qualitative interviews and the quantitative survey in Ben Ari's study indicated a benefit from parent education regarding homosexuality prior to learning of their child's sexual orientation. Attitudes around homosexuality prior to disclosure were found to have an important impact on not only parent adjustment (e.g. the movement toward acceptance) but also on family dynamics (e.g. increased honesty) after disclosure. Discourse present in the data from the current study lent additional support to these findings. All of the parent participants mentioned exposure and prior knowledge of non-heterosexual people and to some degree gay culture prior to their children's disclosures.

Parents also spoke about early clues that led them to believe that their children were not heterosexual. Often based on these clues, parents in the current study did not react with shock or anger nor did they summarily reject their children. While Yasai's mother's reactions was more indicative of what had been described in previous research, overall parent reactions seemed to fall outside of the grief model. Instead, existing relational processes in families seemed to inform reactions within more than one specific model or modality. While indicative of reports from previous research, more consistent with the current findings is the idea that Yasai's mother reacted to learning that her son

was gay in the way that seemed to be typical of reactivity in the family system. The reaction in Yasai's family is thematic of reactions among the other participant parents. Like Yasai and his mother, Tatiana's, Cicero's, and Alison's families all extended their modes of adaptation, whether they were organization, communication, cohesion, or estrangement, to the ways in which they made meaning of having a gay child.

The coming out experience was transformational for the families in the current study, which is congruent with the findings in Ben Ari (1995). The author found that from the parents' perspective, family dynamics such as honesty had increased following the children's disclosures. In the present study, family members described an impact that was characterized by such dynamics, but was constructed as changes at the level of process. Cicero's mother very vividly described how she not only had learned to see her son differently, but that some of her core beliefs about her son's future as a partner and parent had changed. These beliefs, as the entire family had expressed, were steeped in a family legacy of marriage and long-term commitment. This change for Cicero's mother was not merely individualized. Cicero described what his mother's expression of acceptance for his relationship meant to him and to his partner. This change in Cicero's mother's views and ideas resulted in change in the relational space that existed between them, and between Cicero's partner and his parents. Yasai also expressed the importance he attached to his mother's expressions of acceptance as did Alison with her father. While dynamics such as communication and closeness may have been enhanced by the disclosure event, for the families in the current study the disclosure seemed to transform those processes that were both observed and reported.

One such process that was not evident in the review of literature but was present in the current study warrants mention. Cohler (2005) discussed the idea of “backward socialization” in families of gay youth, but suggesting that in these family systems traditional parent to child socialization becomes reversed. The author states that “an individual’s disclosure to family members of same-gender orientation and acceptance of gay or lesbian (or queer) sexual identity is an ‘ideal type’ of backward socialization” (p. 156). Here the author refers to the adaptive processes that have been previously discussed in comparison to Ben Ari (1995), and again suggests that the impact of gay youth on their family runs more deeply than mere dynamics. Examples of backwards socialization were present in the findings of the current study, and were illustrative of a developmental assimilation and accommodation for both parents and youth.

Differentiation, as described by Piaget, is a process of increasing complexity among cognitive structures or schemata (Wadsworth, 1989). As parents and youth in the study engaged in what the present discourse constructs as queered relational processes, these interactions presented new and challenging environmental features, which required families to differentiate their perceptions and experiences. In some instances parents assimilated their understanding into current understandings that were based in heterosexist relational frameworks. As parents held expectations of the children engaging in heterosexual marriage and parenting, some reconstructed the expectations around their children’s same-sex relationships. In other instances, the parents of gay youth in the study seemed to accommodate new ways of understanding their children’s futures. The youth were inescapably linked to their parents in this process, as perhaps they were already capable of understanding themselves and their sexualities in more

complex ways. Like reverse socialization, this aspect of the lived experiences of these families seems to be indicative of a reverse or queered developmental change.

The above discussion regarding meaning making in families of gay youth is derived from studies in which youth and parents were investigated separately. This leads to comparisons with those studies of which the present study is an extension. This research builds on the work of researchers such as Beeler & DiProva (1999) and Baptist (2002), but makes a departure in terms of conducting family interviews with youth, parents, and other family members together. In these studies, as in the present research, the constructions of meaning making in families of gay youth as they have been reported are more than perceptive accounts of youth and parents separately. These descriptions represent co-constructions of reality between youth and their families together. This research extends the work of Baptist (2002) by incorporating multiple family cases rather than implementing a single case study design.

Beeler & DiProva (1999), whose study yielded twelve themes, concluded that that the experiences of families are more complex than can be accounted for in linear stage progression models such as those based on grief experiences. Similarly, the present study on gay youth and their families revealed a high degree of diversity and complexity of experience. Multiple themes emerged from each case in the collection as discussed in Chapter Four. While at times these themes seemed similar, the discourse that supported them revealed subtle but important nuances in the manner in which families had constructed their experiences. Cross case themes also represented collective of experiences, which while thematic in content, were also representative of the complexity and diversity of family systems in general.

Baptist (2000) reported five distinct themes which related to the identity development of the individual, the impact of the level of identity development on the family, the integration of the individual into the family, the development of social supports, and an orientation toward social concerns. These themes traced a parallel progression for the gay individual and the family of that individual. Just as the individual came into a sense of self as a gay person, the family also found a new collective way of identifying. These findings suggested that having a gay child in a family has an impact on how the family is conceptualized and constructed by its members. This finding that family dynamics and relationships are reshaped after a child discloses his or her sexuality was certainly echoed in the present research. By engaging more than one family participant in the current study, the depth of this reshaping that families experience could be better clarified. In addition, the degree of complexity that Beeler and DiProva (1999) reported was deepened and extended beyond a single case.

This element of the current study is what sets it apart in comparison to all of the studies reviewed and discussed in this section. By engaging multiple families of gay youth in a qualitative research project, a greater depth and breadth of information is contributed to the frame of current knowledge.

Question 2

*How is emotional expression characterized in families of gay youth
before and after coming out?*

The coming out or disclosure experience for the four families, although constructed differently between them, was a pivotal and crucial point for family relationships. Interestingly enough, the data did not yield a notable shift in patterns of

emotional expression in families after the disclosure event occurred. What the data did indicate was that the emotional climate of the family, although varied among participants, impacted the collective experience of the youth coming out. Emotional expression among family members was not only conveyed through action and interaction, but also through elements of the family structure.

Negative emotional expression most frequently was conveyed by the youth in the study based on interactions with or reactions from their parents. None of the parents in the study expressed strong negative emotions related to their children's sexuality. Feelings expressed by the youth in the study ranged from disappointment and hurt to generally positive expressions based on their parents' reactions to their sexuality. Yasai and Cicero both shared feelings of loneliness and isolation as they encountered individuals and environments that were hostile and not accepting of their sexual orientations. Yasai generally stood out from other participants as these experiences outside of his family were recapitulated within his family system, where he faced similar experiences of threat and harassment at home. This lack of safety in the family was different from the experiences of the other youth in the study who characterized the emotional climates in their homes as at least somewhat of a respite from what they encountered outside of their families.

Communication patterns were fundamental to each family's emotional climate and were inexorably linked in the data. Those families who portrayed their emotional climate in generally positive ways tended to characterize communication patterns in terms of openness, affection, and appreciation. This was not the case in families who reported more negative emotional climates. In those cases communication was most

often described and observed as negative, critical, and pessimistic. All four families expressed humor in their interactions despite the manner in which they were otherwise constructed. Warmth and caring were also present in communication patterns across families although often present at different times for different reasons. While in some cases supportive communication was generally present, in others it was typically motivated by some form of marginalizing event either inside or outside of the family. Both types of families drew role related distinctions in emotional expression along gender lines, although not necessarily stereotypical ones.

In the current collection of cases, these characteristics of emotional expression and communication tended to be related to intentional family structuring. Within a family development perspective, structure is defined by aspects of family organization, including the presence of hierarchy, boundaries, and parental coalitions (Nichols & Schwartz, 2002). Generally, those elements of family structure that tended to be indicative of more positive relational processes were those structures that were specific in their intention and design, and were characterized by seemingly strong parental subsystems and recognizable hierarchies which dictated the flow of emotion and support from parents to children. Having this structure in place allowed these families to accommodate new ways of understanding their children as not heterosexual and all that entailed. In contrast, those cases from the current study in which hierarchies between parents and children were flat and boundaries were diffuse, were characterized by negative emotional expression and marginalizing discourse as well as actual incidents of harassment and aggression. In addition, youth in these cases assumed more parentified roles in the family. Accommodating new meaning around sexuality was seemingly more

difficult for these families, with criticism, estrangement, and failed problem solving typifying the coming out experience.

As mentioned previously, the salience of the coming out experience for the family cannot be ignored. All four families constructed this experience, often in different ways between parents and youth, without being specifically solicited to describe it. Families deemed this event as central to their understanding of themselves as families of gay youth. While generally supportive of their children, each family's specific reactions and paths to acceptance differed in terms of the nature of the relational processes that already existed in the family system. The disclosure event engaged these processes fully and perhaps intensified the processes that each family constructed. The way in which these processes were engaged suggests that the coming out experience is inextricable from the relational processes in families. Coming out is inherently relational.

Comparison to Literature

Coming out has garnered a great deal of scrutiny in existing research, both in terms of youth, parents, and the family system. Savin-Williams and Dube (1998) characterize the experience of a child disclosing a non-heterosexual orientation to parents as traumatic. This trauma extends not only to the parent-child relationship, but to the family system as a whole. Merghi and Grimes (2000) also posited the importance of the family system on the coming out process for gay youth, stating that "the process of coming out in families may be shaped not only by the parent-child relationship, but also by the conservative or liberal nature of the family system" (p. 33). Boxer, Cook, and Herdt (1991) suggest that the disclosure of a child initiates a "coming out" process for parents as well, during which milestones in the family lifecycle such as a child's marriage and having grandchildren must be reevaluated and meanings reorganized. Saltzburg (2004) reported

a related finding from a qualitative research study, reporting that parents revealed that being told of their child's sexual orientation was a salient event even in cases where they previously suspected their child might be gay or lesbian. As discussed in the response to the second research question, a youth's disclosure of a non-heterosexual orientation emerged as a salient and crucial point in the current study. While this salience is reflective of previous research in this area, the present findings reveal some different perceptions and constructions of what had been reported.

In a study foundational to the current research, D'Augelli, Hershberger, and Plinkington (1998) surveyed youth about their coming out experiences within their families and reported demographic and descriptive data. The researchers found that generally those subjects that had disclosed or come out to their parents indicated significantly higher levels of overall comfort with their sexuality. From the youth subjects' point of view, more mothers than fathers were perceived as accepting. While fathers actually exhibited negative reactions more frequently, the actual or anticipated reactions of mothers proved to be the most significant factor in the experience of coming out or decision to disclose. Verbal abuse as well as physical attacks from family members was reported by both male and female youth and suicide attempts were reported by over half of those subjects who had disclosed to their parents. Discussing these results, the authors state that "this study demonstrates the extent to which disclosure to families—and family members' reactions to it—are critical factors in the adjustment of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth. Such disclosure is a central dilemma both for young people who have already told their families and for those who remain reluctant to do so" (p. 367).

Waldner and Macgruder (1999) stated that "gay youth who perceive supportive resources, who are already expressing their identity, and who report weaker family relations

are more “out” to their parents (p. 86). Based on their results, the authors posited a cost-benefit model of coming out, in which youth essentially weighed the personal and social costs of coming out against the benefits of doing so. Authors suggested that the family would most likely act as a conduit for social discourse regarding homosexuality, which is traditionally comprised of negative messages, and that positive family relations would lead to more investment in these negative messages and result in youth being less likely to disclose a non-heterosexual orientation.

For the youth in the current inquiry, disclosure to their parents occurred in different ways and for different reasons. Yasai’s mother found out from a third party while Alison’s parents became aware of her sexuality over time through her physical and psychosocial development. Tatiana and Cicero both disclosed to their parents as adolescents. Rather than characterizing reactions along gendered lines as in previous research, the parent reactions in the current study were constructed around existing roles and relationships. Cicero’s parents, for example, pointed out a head and heart or thinking-feeling dimension between them. Following their son’s disclosure, Cicero’s father read books and did research and his mother contemplated what this meant for the future in terms of marriage and grandchildren. Reactions and emotional expression were also informed by family structure. Tatiana’s family relied on those elements of family structure which they had created from the time their daughter was a child. Maintaining cohesion through open communication characterized their coming out experience. The structure of both Tatiana’s and Cicero’s families provided a means through which emotional expression and support could take place. For Tatiana this structure informed any kind of cost-benefit analysis she may have constructed. Her parents very explicitly described how their daughter could tell them anything without fear of negative repercussions. The way in which communication processes operated within the family seemed to lower costs and increase benefits for Tatiana. The ways in which roles and

relationships were constructed in Cicero's family led him to disclose to his mother before his father, with perhaps the perception of less cost or risk. Also of significance and worth noting is that Alison's family's experience was quite different with respect to this research as a specific disclosure event was not constructed in the data. There was no cost benefit determination for her nor was there a decision to disclose or not.

All of these families were subject to social messages as suggested by Waldner and Magruder (1999). In these cases Tatiana and Cicero an initial glance might suggest that these families did not allow these messages to perpetuate themselves within the family to any great degree. A closer look, however, reveals an illustration of the subtlety and insidious nature of heterosexist social discourse. The parents in all of the cases, including Cicero and Tatiana, expressed expectations of heterosexual marriage and parenting prior to their children's disclosures. Tatiana discussed the strength that this message held for her and how it informed her cost benefit analysis despite her experiences of open communication and unconditional acceptance in her family. Cicero's mother's acceptance of his same-sex partnership was constructed within heterosexist notions of how relationships should appear and function. In both cases these constructions were offered in the caring and warm manner that characterized both family systems. On one level these relational processes and structural elements seemed to provide resistance to the effects of those negative social messages posited in the research and allowed disclosure to be facilitated rather than inhibited. This resistance is disturbed, however, by the recognition that this marginalizing heterosexist discourse still infiltrates family relational processes post disclosure, a distinction not made in the existing body of research.

In contrast, Yasai's family provided a more blatant example of the phenomena that had been posited by D'Augelli et al. (1998) as well as Waldner & Magruder (1999).

Yasai's family did serve as a conduit for negative social discourse, which was in turn recapitulated in family relational processes. Yasai experienced violence in the home that was related to his sexual orientation. In addition he reported feelings of loneliness and isolation that contributed to expressions of suicidality. Yasai's mother shared how her upbringing in organized religion contributed to her beliefs about having a gay son. Perhaps Yasai's desire to maintain closeness with his mother kept him from disclosing his same-sex attractions to her. Perhaps his mother's unwillingness to recognize indications that her son might not be heterosexual was reciprocal. This hypothesis would extend the conclusions of Waldner and Magruder (1999) suggesting that positive family relations, or in this case the desire to achieve and maintain them, would lead to more investment in social messages, and result in youth being less likely to disclose *and* the parent less likely to acknowledge a non-heterosexual orientation. In addition, the lack of hierarchy and boundaries in the family system, may position parents and children on a level playing field in terms of achieving and maintaining positive relationships.

All of the youth in the study to some degree illustrate what Savin Williams (2005) terms the "new gay teenager." Writing on contemporary gay teens, Savin-Williams states that "in this new century, same-sex-attracted teenagers are leading lives that are nearly incomprehensible to earlier generations of gay youth. To understand what it is like to be young with same-sex attractions now often means discarding our previous ideas about what it means to be gay" (p. 14). As suggested by the third cross case theme, *Queering the System*, the coming out event, if there is one, is merely the initiation of a family transformation, one that occurs due to the very presence of a non-heterosexual youth in the system. Illustrative of those youth that Savin-Williams described, the four youth in this study constructed their experiences of coming out and being out as not consistently

troubled and victimized, but rather in the spirit of being social pioneers and agents of change.

In addition to youths' experiences with coming out, previous research has also addressed the perceptions and reactions of parents. As discussed with regard to family meaning making, several studies regarding parent reactions to coming out posited a model based on grief (Robinson, Walters, and Skeen, 1989; Ben Ari, 1995). This type of conceptualization was widely present in the research reviewed. Savin-Williams & Dube (1998) stated that "once confronted with the reality of their child's sexual orientation, parents have been described by mental health professionals as reacting with symptoms of grief and mourning..." (p. 7).

The parent participants in the present study, like the youth, had a range of reactions. Only one parent, Cicero's father, mentioned grief as part of his construction of having a gay son. More prevalent in Cicero's family's reaction was concern and care for their son. Taking the lead, his parents presented a united front of support and made collaborative decisions that would govern how their son's disclosure would be managed within the family. Tatiana's parents reactions, while supportive, were constructed as almost nonreactive. For her family, the reactions to her disclosure fell directly into the framework for communication that Tatiana had known and to which she had become accustomed. Yasai's family was more typical of what has been reported in previous research findings. The incident of his mother coming to find out he was gay from his school was characterized as traumatic, much as Savin-Williams and Dube (1998) posited.

The findings regarding the coming out experience from youth and parent studies are also reflected in family studies in more systemic ways. Beeler and DiProva (1999) and Baptist (2002) reported thematic findings around the coming out experience which

related to communication, family roles, emotional expression, and the family lifecycle. These findings are congruent with the current outcomes with significant methodological exceptions. The research reported here involved multiple families and data was collected from parents, youth, and partners together. The breadth inherent in the current data provides a glimpse more deeply into the similarities and differences in relational process among families of gay youth. Coming out is certainly informed by, constructed around, and in some cases embedded in these processes. More importantly, the present study emphasizes that the coming out event and its related processes occur in context. These relational processes do not result from this event in total, but rather often represent clear and present patterns in the family system. The families in the current study relied on those relational resources that they knew, whether these resources were considered functional by the existing body of theory or not. The point in time that a youth disclosed or a parent began to understand that his or her child was not heterosexual, is the point when these existing relational processes began to transform for families in the study. The manner in which multiple aspects of context were considered across multiple families draws a unique contrast to the existing research.

Question 3

What social factors impact the process of family meaning making?

A salient element of the coming out process as it was described in the previous section is the intersection between the interior of the family system and the external context in which it exists. When the youth in the study disclosed their sexual orientations to their families the family system became subject to a host of social discourses around sexuality and queerness. The disclosure event invited a host of potential acts of

discrimination, harassment, and safety concerns into each participant family. Every parent participant expressed concern for their sons or daughters because of the social and cultural stigma that surrounds individuals that are not heterosexual. These concerns were a direct result of the presence and acknowledgement of a gay youth in the family. In addition, every family, with the exception of Alison and her father, described experiences with harassment and discrimination in their communities. Social institutions were also implicated as sources of marginalization in the data.

Experiences in school were particularly salient for the youth participants. Three of the four families described marginalization in formal education settings, with more provocative accounts delineated by gender. Tatiana and her mother also discussed negative experiences that Tatiana experienced in middle school, but those incidents were not conveyed as having the same impression as those that Cicero's and Yasai's families posited during the interviews. The youth's constructions of these experiences were tied to perceptions of gendered appearance and behavior. While Tatiana described a phase when her gender performance was more butch, she also constructed herself as being capable of conforming to constructed feminine social ideals. Cicero and Yasai, however, were observably soft spoken, seemingly gentle young men who recognized to some degree that they were socially constructed as being feminine. Seemingly, their feminization was not based on intentional performance, but rather on the manner in which they expressed themselves as sexual and gendered individuals. For these two young men, this expression carried a social brand of sexuality, which by its very nature became grounds on which victimization could occur. Perhaps Cicero and Yasai could have avoided victimization if they had made an effort to socially perform as more

masculine and butch. Regardless, the findings in this study indicated that the harassment of feminized males was constructed in more severe and impactful ways than that for masculinized young women. Whether perception or reality, the manner in which these experiences emerged in the data was qualitatively different.

Reactions and responses to marginalization varied depending on the family in the ways in which relational processes were present in each system. With marginalization being such a prevalent experience in Yasai's life, he consistently interacted with his social environment with assiduousness and vigilance. With the expectation of harassment in school and among peers, Yasai was quick to react defensively and with aggression. Here the pattern of victimization is perpetuated even further than the family system. External aggression systemically recapitulated by the family was then turned outward again through the youth. Although not directly constructed as such, Yasai expressed an interest in drag performance perhaps as a way to reclaim as his own the feminization that his was imposed upon him by social environments. Cicero tended to have a much more passive stance toward the harassment he experienced and relied much more heavily on his parents to assist him with alleviating such issues. This passive stance toward social victimization was also recapitulated as the family sent their son away to school in order to escape the harassment he had experienced. These findings present dichotomous flight or fight responses which were indicative of the manner in which relationships in these families were constructed and functioned. The engagement of relational processes as paths for the reverse transmission of social aggression, which was present to some degree in all the family cases, provides a queer framework in which to deconstruct and understand the impact of social messages on the family. In the current

findings, this impact was recursive, not terminating in the family system but being retransmitted outward based on existing systemic ways of coping and problem solving.

Organized religion was also an influential social factor that emerged in the data for all four participant families. Each family in the study constructed a family background that was centered on religion and Judeo-Christian values. These values informed constructions of contextual factors, relationships, and family lifecycle. In some cases religious doctrine informed the ways in which family members made meaning of sexuality and particularly non-heterosexuality. Religion was also inherent in constructions of family lifecycle expectations, particularly those around commitment, monogamy, and parenting. The landscape of religious belief clashed with the experience of having a gay child for most of the families in the study. The disclosure by or outing of the youth initiated a process of deconstruction through which families had to find new ways to make meaning of this aspect of their collective experience. As previously described, this reconstruction was achieved relationally through processes such as communication, socialization, and systemic accommodation.

Descriptions and accounts of social influences were certainly present in the data obtained from the families participating in the current research. As described, at times these influences could be as simple as a glare or sideways glance in a restaurant or on the street. In other instances, youth were openly harassed or made to feel isolated by schools and other social institutions. The relational aspect of these experiences for the four gay youth and their families were found in those spaces where the youth could find supportive relationships, whether within or outside of the family or both. While social messages were still affecting, those families identified in the study as having an

organized structure and positive emotional climate offered their children a greater degree of safety from pressures found outside of the family system. In those participant families where structure and emotional climate were not present or particularly positive, the youth were more apt to have to find their own ways to meet their needs for nurturing and support. At that crucial disclosure point where the interior of the family and the external context intersect, relational processes serve as an important protective factor as well as a conduit for the retransmission of social effects. For the four families in the study, those with high degrees of cohesion, communication, and adaptability offered their youth a safe space in which to be embedded and in turn emotionally and physically protected. Without those qualities, youth were more apt to be at the mercy of a social context that viewed them as inadequate and less than based on their sexuality and sexual expression.

Comparison to Literature

The impact of social factors and experiences of marginalization are clearly present in existing research regarding gay youth. Drug use, violence, prostitution, and homelessness are social problems in which the literature has reported gay youth are involved (National Gay & Lesbian Task Force, 2006). Radkowsky and Siegel (1997) report that as a result of social marginalization gay youth often experience feelings of loneliness and isolation, while Pope (2004) cites several studies that indicate gay teens are "three to five times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers" (p. 41). Authors frame this experience of otherness and isolation as systemic, stating that "feeling different (and often not being able to understand the feeling), youths withdraw from others, or try to act 'straight' with varying degrees of success [which] widens the gap between private identity and public identity" (Rivers & D'Augelli, 2001, p. 200). As this

research would suggest, as gay youth withdraw from their social context, for many the family becomes their network for support and possibly only opportunity for acceptance. Rivers and D'Augelli (2001) cite a number of research studies that suggest that the family environment does not always provide the foundation needed for gay youth to thrive but instead becomes a setting in which negative social messages are received and retransmitted. While gay youth struggle with the effects of social factors they are also challenging the social and cultural norms related to gender and sexuality that have been engrained in their family systems. The authors state that "the home is often not a safe haven for LGB youths if they tell their families about themselves or if their sexual orientation becomes known" (p. 206), and cite reports of verbal and physical abuse from existing research (Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995; Herek & Berrill, 1992; Hunter, 1990).

These family characteristics as derived from the existing scholarly literature on gay youth and their families are apparent in the findings of the current study as well. Youth participants experienced the impact of marginalizing social factors as part of their external contexts as well as within their families. Yasai's experiences offered a profound example of these phenomena. His constructions were persistently characterized by incidents of harassment and abuse and feelings of isolation and "otherness." These incidents were evident for Yasai in school as well as among and between individuals in his community. In addition, he experienced the same types of incidents among members of his family. While his home environment was different, Cicero also reported these same types of experiences outside of his family system. Reflecting on his experiences, Cicero came to understand his experiences over time to be not only social but institutional. Rather than being recapitulated in his family, Cicero's family served to

insulate him from the impact of these factors. When social factors enacted feelings of isolation and loneliness for Cicero, he was able to turn to his family for support and remediation.

These processes of support and remediation were also present in existing research on parent perceptions. Robinson, Walters, and Skeen (1989), for example, found that parents of gay youth had concerns regarding their child's health and well being. For some authors writing in a particular time in recent history, these concerns were particularly constructed around concerns about HIV and AIDS, a health epidemic that was directly associated with gay men (Glick-Schiller, Crystal, & Lewellen, 1994). Qualitative research studies, such as Baptist (2002) and Beeler and DiProva (1999), also reported themes regarding parents' expressions of social concerns for their children. In much the same way, parents participating in the current study also expressed similar concerns. The construction of concerns from parents derived from the data not only revealed worries about their children's safety and well-being but also an orientation to social issues relevant to queer populations. Yasai's mother found meaning about her son in news stories about incidents of violence toward gays. Tatiana's parents reported an increased awareness of laws and civil rights issues that related to their daughter's status as a bisexual woman, an awareness that was to some degree facilitated by Tatiana herself. Cicero's parents, motivated by their concerns for their son's well-being, worked to identify educational opportunities that offered an environment where their son could feel safe and accepted. These new and unique concerns again illustrate how having a gay youth in the family transformed family perspectives and values as well as another way in which social factors contributed to meaning making in families.

Additional Findings

In addition to exploring answers to the research questions posited at the beginning of the present inquiry, other notable findings emerged in the themes derived from the data. The most relevant of these was the spirit of resilience that was embodied by each family in the study. As discussed in Chapter Five, regardless of the method or mode of disclosure, the reactions of parents and family members, and the experiences in social contexts, all the participants in the study constructed their experiences around not only a value for family connection, but also a striving for family closeness. When family systems became disconnected due to the coming out experience or some other more mundane or typical family conflict, the families strived toward resolution and reconnection. Yasai and his mother were observably pleased as they shared how they had come back together after a long period of being disconnected, as were other families who shared stories of conflict and resolution. The path to resilience in these four families was, like the other aspects of family phenomena discussed, embedded in relational processes. Tatiana's family, for example, described a short period of estrangement during Tatiana's first semester of college. Chalking this occurrence up to typical adolescent development, the family described a resilient stance toward family conflict and conflict resolution. Her parents took the lead in employing this stance, asserting with confidence that the foundation of support and cohesion that they had created for the family would carry them through the crisis. Cicero's parent's also employed those communication dynamics that characterized the family system to weather the crises that Cicero experienced growing up gay.

While resilience among participants was certainly collective and systemic, the resilient nature of the four youth participants is also worthy of discussion. All four youth shared marginalizing experiences which ranged from judgmental looks and glares to actual incidents of physical violence. At one point during the interviews with his family, Cicero very eloquently described how his marginalization had moved beyond mere incidences and had become ecological, pervading every aspect of his existence. Although to say that the youth in this study were “survivors” may sound cliché, each one of them endured the treacherous physical and emotional landscape of their social and sometimes family lives and emerged as strong and capable young people. An excellent example of this concept of survivorship was Alison. Drawing on her strength of self, Alison in particular had become a catalyst for family resilience as she unrelentingly worked to forge and maintain new and better relationships within her family. Like his counterpart, Yasai also offers a portrait of strength in the face of social and familial adversity. While family development and related counseling perspectives might frame both Alison’s and Yasai’s family systems as less than functional and these youth in particular as parentified, caretaking, and even codependent, queer perspectives would suggest that it is those very systems that have socialized these youth to endure and navigate those social systems that are reflected in their families. Perhaps the concept of resilience, as in these families, falls somewhere in the space between theories as it does in the space between family relationships, in the realm of construction and process. This realm is inherently queer, a domain where dominant social discourse does not support those definitions that traditional family development frameworks provide. The act of

systemic reconstruction then is an act of resilience, an act of finding a new way over a social terrain that has become unfamiliar and treacherous.

Comparison to Literature

In recent years, research and writing regarding gay youth has begun to look at the impact of the findings obtained from descriptive studies regarding risk factors and family experiences on this population. While Berger (2005) posits that social and institutional homophobia in the lives of gay youth have resulted in a population in need of support and special services, the author also states that “young people who have support from even one adult, whether a teacher, a mentor, or a relative, show significantly greater levels of coping ability and resilience than those who do not” (p. 24). Jacobs and Freundlich (2006) discuss these same ideas in the context of permanence for gay youth and state that youth in general frequently desire to remain attached to their families of origin despite the events and reasons that may have precipitated their exit or removal from that family system. Both of these authors allude to the idea that gay youth not only possess the potential and desire to be resilient, but also the drive to find and secure their place in both their families and social environments. Savin-Williams (2005) builds on these ideas by shifting the focus on gay youth by conceptualizing them not as consistently troubled and victimized but rather as social pioneers and agents of change. The author suggests that in order to arrive at understanding of contemporary gay youth we must discard “our previous ideas about what it means to be gay” (p. 14). As social agents of change present-day gay youth further trouble dominant discourse around “gayness.” Essentially they queer what it means to be queer. The author characterizes this new way of understanding gay youth as based in resilience. “Describing these young people as

resilient acknowledges the developmental assets they've accumulated over their life course..." (p. 183).

Certainly the youth and their families participating in the current study fit into the conceptualizations that these authors put forth. Closeness and connection with family were highly valued in all of the cases presented and youth such as Yasai and Alison, who didn't necessarily have these qualities inherent in their family systems, strived to achieve and maintain them. Tatiana and Cicero, although both feeling confident that their parents would support them, gave some consideration to the risk they might take in disclosing a non-heterosexual orientation to them. The risk for all four youth was the loss of permanence, regardless of the state in which they had and were experiencing it. These young people, as perhaps any young person would, looked for at least that one supportive adult within their family. Alison articulated how she found that person in her father and how growing up in her family made her tough. Her toughness was observable in the unapologetic way she engaged with her identity and moreover in her sense of self.

Alison, along with her cohort in this study, also embodies what recent scholarly research and writing may say it means to be queer. For these young people, labels were assumed cautiously and sexuality was described in terms of attractions. This was particularly true of Alison and Tatiana as they described the development of their sexual attractions. Tatiana shared how the assumption of a social label, such as bisexual, was a personal and internal process of reflection and the development of self awareness. Yasai described his enjoyment of gay drag, and the manner in which he could use gender to entertain but also challenge others' ideas and conceptions. Youth constructed their options for attraction, sexual behavior, sexual attraction, relationships, and parents as

flexible and in some cases fluid. Smith (2002) states that “queer articulates a radical questioning of social and cultural norms, notions of gender, reproductive sexuality, and the family” (p. 28); Stone-Fish and Harvey (2006) state that “queer...posits that sexualities are constructed within social contexts” (p. 30). The youth in this study personify these statements in their ways of being in their families and the world, their abilities to endure the position of the other in multiple contexts, and their perseverance to claim their self.

Limitations of the Study

The current study engaged in an exploratory analysis of the lived experiences of gay youth and their families. Specifically, the research questions focused on relational processes, an area which represented a gap in the current body of scholarship and knowledge. In order to answer the questions that guided the inquiry, the research posited a qualitative research design which employed a phenomenological approach within an interpretivist paradigm. This paradigm was informed by three distinct theoretical perspectives or lenses: social constructionism, family development theory, and postmodern queer theory. The research was designed as a collective or multiple case study and traditional qualitative methods such as purposeful sampling and emergent interviewing were implemented. While the study was carefully designed to be methodologically sound, certain limitations became apparent over the course of the research.

Sampling issues delimited the research outcomes in several ways. First, the sampling plan proved to be somewhat inadequate in obtaining the desired demographic characteristics of the sample. While the goal of the sampling process was to recruit youth

between the ages of 18 and 21, the age range of the youth participants was 20-23. This age range falls at the upper limits of how the term “gay youth” is defined in the literature. A contributing factor to the narrow range of youth participant ages was the sampling plan itself. The plan to obtain a purposeful sample, by recruiting youth and in turn their families through gay student organizations on college campuses, proved limiting. While this environment was rich in terms of the age range desired, these organizations were found not necessarily comprised of the desired population, “out” gay youth. These organizations served the campus communities as agents of support and did not necessarily cater to the needs of those youth who were already out to themselves and their families. Half of the participant families were acquired through the proposed sampling plan. Other families were obtained through referrals, suggesting that chain, referral, and snowball sampling techniques may be more effective for future research in this area. These referrals came from individuals who were acquainted with the researcher and familiar with the project as well as through community organizations such as PFLAG (Parents, Families, & Friends of Lesbians and Gays). Casting a wide net in order to obtain as large and diverse a sample as possible is certainly a lesson derived from the sampling experience described.

Availability of resources to achieve the best sample possible was also a clear and present limitation in the study. In some instances, eligible youth and their families were not selected for participation due to geographic distance and issues of time. Funding for travel in order to collect data was not available, thus reducing the feasibility of working with some interested families. While the use of distance technology for interviewing participant families was considered, the inconvenience, cost, and nature of these

resources made them prohibitive. In addition, the use of such technology would have been methodologically different, altering the experience and outcomes of the research. The researcher determined that the ability to collect observational data through these methods was deficient in comparison to face to face interviews. In order to better ensure the veracity of data triangulation in the study, only face to face interviewing was employed with participant families.

Diversity presents another limitation of the current study that is also related to the sample. Originally this study set out to fill a gap in the existing research on gay youth and their families by obtaining a group of participants that was atypical as they related to those in existing research. Unfortunately, this goal was not achieved. Although the current sample was balanced in terms of biological gender and family form, and minimally diverse in terms of religion, parent education, and socioeconomic status, all participants were Caucasian. Returning to a critique of the original sampling plan, the organizations from which participants were solicited were not particularly diverse in terms of race. This assertion is purely observational and based on youth present at meetings where the research was presented and discussed. Upon reflection, this particular goal for the sample was not adequately addressed as the sampling process was implemented. Again, a broader, more varied, and in the case of this particular issue, intentional approach to obtaining the research sample is necessary to increase participant diversity in terms of race, class, and gender. This goal must be more than merely stated, but supported by the time and effort necessary to achieve it.

Given the concerns for the credibility and trustworthiness of the data that are inherently present in qualitative inquiry, limitations related to data collection warrant

mention as part of this discussion. Not every family followed through with their assignment to present artifact data, leaving a gap in the data set for one family in particular. Observational accounts, while documented during and written up after the interviews, were steeped in subjectivity with no objective form of evaluation. Engaging in this process as an individual and not as part of a research team, peer debriefing and collaborative data collection was not an inherent component of the methodology. While peer debriefing was regularly sought out, a mechanism for confirming observational data was not present. Videotaping interviews was considered as an alternative. This option was not employed as the researcher felt that it presented a threat to participants' anonymity and confidentiality which outweighed the value to the data collection process.

The amount of time between the first and second family interview is a final methodological concern. Over the course of data collection, the timeframe between the two family interviews varied among participants. This variation ranged from one week between interviews to six weeks. While this inconsistency was necessary to accommodate the needs of individual families, it does represent a potential limitation for the study. The impact of more or less time between interviews on the data was not discernable in the analyses; however, the experiences of the participants with the research process were certainly different. Regardless of the fact that emancipatory assumptions were not made in this study, the phenomenology of the research process would seem to be tied to the data obtained and thus is put forward as a possible limitation.

In addition to the limitations due to methodological and related concerns, the subject matter of the study imposed an inimitable constraint on the research. As the current study revealed, social factors and marginalizing discourse around non-

heterosexuality were recognizable forces which influenced the participant families. The social experiences of being gay were in many ways counterintuitive to the ambitions of the study. First, as relayed by some participant youth, many of their college age peers had not disclosed their sexual orientation to their parents for fear of some of the same consequences of doing so that were reported in the data. At times, even when youth had disclosed, having a discussion about sexuality for the purpose of this research was not a comfortable option. The impact of the confounding quality of the research topic is dual in nature. While it prevented participation for some, those who agreed to participate might be considered qualitatively different from their counterparts just by their willingness to do so. Therefore, the findings reported here should be considered with this and the other limitations discussed in mind.

Despite these limitations, the strategy and methods of the current study resulted in a unique and important glimpse of the lived experiences of dynamic relationships between the members of four families of gay youth. Conducted with a non-positivist postmodern qualitative framework, these results don't carry broad generalizability. The use of theory to interpret and understand the constructed experiences of each family provides a degree of logical generalizability which is based on the individual who reads these accounts. The limited generalizable nature of the results, the subjective methods, and the interpretive analyses should not be perceived as limiting and the reported results should not be discounted on these bases. Rather, the results should be consumed in the manner in which they were framed and reported and applied in the same manner they were obtained, with careful consideration given to context and respect for individual differences and constructions of experiences. The reality of these findings lies within the

manner in which the reader understands them and carries them forward in future research and practice.

Having established this scope of generalizability, the groundbreaking nature of this research cannot be discounted. The current approach is significant to the understanding of the research problem in several ways. First, by collecting data from family members together rather than in separate interviews, the systemic nature of lived experiences is illuminated. This is distinctive in comparison with past research. Also, the use of multiple theoretical lenses in the description and interpretation of data offers a fresh new perspective on family experiences. Pitting a modernist framework against a postmodern one is reflective of these families' experiences in the world. The application of queer theory in the current study has tapped into an entirely new range of inquiry, which adds a new dynamic and depth to the current scope of scholarly informed practice in educational and clinical settings.

Future Directions of Inquiry

The research study reported herein adds to the existing body of inquiry regarding gay youth and their families. The goal of the current study was to uncover, explore, and seek to understand the lived experiences of these families. In achieving this goal, the study yielded a body of dynamic data which offered rich information both in breadth and complexity. This complexity is represented by the findings presented in Chapters Four and Five. The contents of those chapters along with the discussion of the research questions and limitations in this chapter suggest several areas for continued study and consideration. Perhaps most obvious extension of the current study is to include more families as an extension or replication. Using the current findings as a foundation and

keeping the posited limitations in mind, such a replication would serve to fortify and amplify the voices which have contributed thus far.

The present study engaged in an exploration of constructions of relationships and the underlying processes of those relationships in families of gay youth. In doing so, the constructions of sexuality among family members, youth and parents alike, emerged in the data. Often tied to dominant gender stereotypes and behaviors, these constructions informed how families and youth understood themselves in the past, present, and future. With the current focus on relational processes, the more basic question how of families understand and make meaning of sexuality did not garner a primary focus. Based on the findings of this study, this focus seems quite salient particularly from the perspective of social construction and socialization within families. For the families in the present study, meaning about gender and sexuality was often presented as counter to traditional ideas of socialization. If indeed the presence of gay youth “queers” the family system, then how does that influence the meaning of sexuality on a systemic level? How does that collective meaning empower or disempower gay youth in families? These questions seem quite relevant and indicative of a deeper and broader qualitative understanding of sexuality as a familial construct.

In addition, a study that focuses on specific aspects of the phenomenological account as it has been presented. If the lived experience of relationships in families of gay youth is the focus of inquiry, how do coexisting family phenomena such as addiction, violence, mental illness, and divorce have impact on the lived experiences of gay youth and their families? While these coexisting phenomena were apparent in the present study, a focused exploration of their impact was not in the scope of the current research.

The current data suggested that the existence of these contextual phenomena certainly had an impact on relational process. Given the scope of this study, the full intersection of such factors with the experiences constructed around having a gay young person in the family could not be fully delineated. Research isolating these co-occurring variables might illuminate these possible interactions more clearly.

The influence of social factors as described by the families in this study suggests that the external context of the family has an impact on relationships. This impact warrants further investigation particularly in terms of the ways in which dominant social discourse serves to inhibit those family processes that allow gay youth to find acceptance and belonging. An opportunity emerges here for critical humanist inquiry. By engaging this population of families in participatory research with emancipatory assumptions, the process of participation could serve as a catalyst to free families from negative social messages that inform their relationships with one another. A postmodern queer critique situates these family systems at the mercy of social discourse, from which the oppressive effects are inescapable. These oppressive heterosexist elements of discourse were present in the data obtained from families in the current study, even those families that a family development lens would deem functional. Using critical humanism as a paradigm with a perspective derived from queer theory forms the basis for a participatory research project designed to not only illuminate the oppression to which this population of youth and their families are subjected but also serve to free them from that oppression.

The framework for a grounded theory project could also be anchored in the current study based on the discussions and critiques derived from family development theory and queer theory. Again, advancing the scope of the present study, a grounded

theory approach would seek more deeply to understand the ways in which traditional systemic perspectives might integrate with postmodern queer perspectives. What does queer theory have to offer in terms of troubling heterosexist assumptions as they exist in traditional approaches to family development and systems? Does the integration of queer and family development perspectives result in a theory of queer systems that has an ultimate benefit to the understanding of families of gay youth? The answers to these questions would not only add to the understanding initiated by the current study but also advance these findings into a new realm of formal inquiry with the potential result being improved ways to conceptualize families through an integrated theoretical lens. Analyzing and interpreting data with a framework for theory building could advance the notion of a queer systems theory as an agenda for research and assistance for families of gay youth.

While additional qualitative approaches would continue to increase the breadth of knowledge about gay youth and their families, quantitative research would also provide beneficial knowledge by investigating the nuances of family experiences. Measurement instruments such as the Global Assessment of Relational Functioning (GARF) could provide a direct quantitative framework in which the current study could be replicated in a postpositivist quantitative tradition (Yingling, Miller, McDonald, & Galewater, 1998). Also, by isolating constructs that emerged in the qualitative data obtained here, a better understanding of the depth of family experiences could be achieved. For example, examining adaptive processes in families of gay youth and families of straight youth through the use of valid and reliable rating scales could potentially refine the perceptions of resilience that were distilled from the qualitative data obtained in this study. Likewise,

the impact of coexisting contextual phenomena such as substance abuse and mental illness in families of gay youth could be investigated in terms of cause and effect interactions as well as correlational relationships. Attitudinal measures and stress indices could also refine current knowledge of the ways in which perceptions influence behaviors in these particular families and environmental assessments could provide more objective measurement of those characteristics that comprise the interiors of this particular population of families. In addition to these types of research studies, quantitative and mixed methods approaches could examine those aspects of development that operate in families of gay youth. Schemas of family development, adolescent development, gay identity development, and cognitive complexity all offer measurable constructs that could be put forward into the realm of research with families of gay youth. These types of inquiry would not only supplement scholarship in this area, but would directly address practical needs for accountability and stewardship in clinical treatment and educational settings. Addressing the need for this accountability ultimately contributes to the advocacy needs of this population.

The directions for future inquiry discussed all build upon and relate to the findings reported from the current study on families of gay youth. By perpetuating this line of research, the gap that exists in the current scholarly knowledge about this population can continue to be filled. Addressing this gap through scholarship carries with it a specific call to the field of Counselor Education, a professional field that has posited little research in this area.

Implications for Counseling & Family Therapy

The findings of this study have implications for the practice of counseling and in particular family therapy. The following discussion will outline those implications within the realm of theory, theoretically informed case conceptualization, counseling approaches, and counseling techniques. Given the paradigm posited in this study, these implications must be viewed with appropriate diligence by the reader. The findings of this study carry logical generalizability and thus the implications of these findings do as well. In order to increase the credibility of these implications, they will be grounded in research and theory throughout the discussion. Also, the mere positing of these implications should in no way be construed as a contention that the families in this study or families of gay youth in general are a population that is in need of or requires therapeutic intervention because of the manner in which they are socially constructed or even self identify.

Family therapy, like all counseling specialties, is essentially a humanistic endeavor. Johnson and Boisvert (2002) state that "a humanistic approach to therapeutic change naturally lends itself to working with couples and families. Humanistic practices exemplify the notion that people are formed and transformed by their relationships with others" (p. 309). Carl Rogers posited the humanistic idea of conditions of worth, which confine individuals by imposing external value judgments (Wilkins, 2000). Framing this concept in a postmodern perspective, conditions of worth are those conditions that divide the other from the self, those conditions that through discourse push the other to the margins of society. Writing from a person centered perspective, Wilkins (2000) cites Barret-Lennard who states that "an effect of conditions of worth is that the individual is

no longer freely open to experience...the resulting incongruence between self and experience, involves a state of 'vulnerability' and a degree of dysfunction" (p. 27). Marecek (2001) describes how conditions of worth become inherent in counseling practice. "Many truisms in psychotherapy are not scientific facts but normative beliefs about groups of people (men and women, whites and blacks, middle class and poor people, straights and gays), these beliefs often reaffirm and justify social inequities" (p. 308). The author posits feminist ideals in the practice of family therapy as an example of a therapeutic domain that has challenged these traditional truisms, particularly in relation to women. Therefore, the incorporation of a feminism into traditional psychotherapy serves to disrupt dominant discourses regarding gender, those that marginalize the gendered other in lieu of the dominant self. The implication of this study for the practice of counseling and family therapy begins with the disruption of discourses about sexuality and the manner in which sexualities operate in family systems. The application of queer thinking to these grounds may serve to increase what can be known in more dynamic and complex ways among individuals and groups.

This disruption through application seems to inherently pit the modernist approach against the postmodern, a rivalry that was present in the findings presented in this report. Families in this study who displayed a demarcated structure, which included defined hierarchies, parental subsystems, and clear boundaries, tended to display higher levels of functioning as defined by more modernist family therapy modalities. Structural family therapy, for example, views family functioning through "three constructs and essential components: structure, subsystems, and boundaries" (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001, p. 238). Postmodern therapeutic approaches on the other hand focus on the

external contextual features of the family and their impact on internal constructions of family narratives. In critique of more modernist approaches, “narrative therapists believe that systems thinking encourages therapists to view families from the position of objective, outside observers as one might study a broken machine, without reference to history, point of view, or environment” (Nichols & Schwartz, 2002, p. 391). Certainly without the view of these types of contextual features, the full experience of the families in the current study could not be fully realized. The coming out experience as has been described in the present discourse offers an excellent illustration of a point in which the external context invades the families’ internal stories as well as a point where family structures are determinant of outcomes for gay youth and their family members. Just as a contrast was drawn through data analysis and reporting between the family development perspective and postmodern queer critique, a dichotomy of conceptualization and approach exists in the realm of counseling practice with the population under consideration. This dichotomy begs the question, what basis of theory best informs the practice of counseling with gay youth and their families?

Lampropoulos (2001) suggests that therapists can not only enhance practice but provide both comprehensive and effective treatment to clients by drawing from multiple theoretical frameworks. This notion as posited by Lampropoulos seems to suggest at least one solution to addressing the complex needs of the population of families being considered. Wolfe (2001) defines assimilative integration as “the incorporation of practices and perspectives from other schools of psychotherapy into one’s own therapy orientation.” By considering and applying this integrative approach to families of gay youth, counselors find an effective means to address both the beneficial structural

elements that were observed in the current study as well as the constructive social forces at play that create marginalizing family stories.

Based on the previous discussion, the following implication for counseling practice can be derived from the findings of the current study:

1. The suspension of heterosexist ideals and other normative truisms present in dominant social discourse and in turn in traditional family systems theory.
2. The identification of beneficial elements of family structure that might be nontraditional or queered within the system (e.g. reverse socialization or adaptive estrangement) and using all structural elements available to create embeddedness and permanence for gay youth and their families.
3. The creation of a counseling space that is free of social conditions of worth and allows families to understand themselves individually and collectively and construct their own story of their past, present, and future.
4. The understanding that sexuality is not the only phenomenon impacting gay youth and their families and considering a full scope of context in developing case conceptualizations and treatment approaches.
5. Conveying unconditional positive regard that is not only grounded in the counseling tradition, but informed and expanded by postmodern and critical theoretical frameworks.

While this integrative framework may be identified as an expansion of modernist counseling approaches or an enhancement of postmodern ones, as Butler (1997) cautions, the “domestication” of either perspective would prove detrimental. “The ‘grounds’ of autonomy...are not grounds in any conventional sense...There is more to learn from

upsetting such grounds, reversing the exclusions by which they are instated, and resisting the institutional domestication of queer thinking” (p. 25). “Upsetting” as Butler puts it is not always an inherent component of humanistic endeavors such as counseling (Plummer, 2005). Perhaps working with queer clients and their families requires us to look at humanism differently and consider the ways in which helping others taps into our own systems of beliefs and values the way we see our families, our relationships, and our future. How does dominant discourse regarding sexuality inform our lives and in turn our work with clients? This question embodies the implications of this study for counselors and counseling practice and as well as true and inherent value of that which is queer.

Implications for Counselor Education

The implications for counseling and family therapy discussed in the previous section also present a charge to the field of Counselor Education to consider current implications of pedagogy and teaching practice on the development of counselor competencies in these areas. The charge to the field and its practical specialties is evident both in the ethical standards of organizations leading the field as well as those bodies accrediting graduate training programs. In their 2001 Standards, the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) stated that studies in counselor education “provide an understanding of the cultural context of relationships, issues and trends in a multicultural and diverse society related to such factors as culture, ethnicity, nationality, age, gender, sexual orientation,…” (p. 12). Among other areas, including current cultural knowledge and advocacy issues, this “understanding of the cultural context of relationships” was to include “individual,

couple, family, group, and community strategies for working with diverse populations and ethnic groups” (CACREP, 2001, p. 13). In addition, the American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics (2005) includes sexual orientation in its Non-Discrimination code (C.5.); the Ethical Code of the International Association of Marriage and Family Counselors (IAMFC, 2005) states that “marriage and family counselors respect cultural diversity. They do not discriminate on the basis of race, gender, disability, religion, age, sexual orientation, cultural background, national origin, marital status, or political affiliation” (p.4). While this inclusion in the IAMFC ethical codes is important, this organization and others like it (e.g. American Association of Marriage & Family Therapy) still espouses heterosexual marriage in their very names. Is this nomenclature respecting diversity in terms of non-heterosexual families who in most instances cannot engage in a legal marriage in the United States?

All of these professional organizations within the field of Counselor Education frame recognition and support for individuals of all sexual orientations within the context of appreciation for diversity and codes related to multiculturalism. The roots of this inclusion in the field stem from Pope (1995) who in an article published in the *Journal of Counseling and Development* argued that gay men and lesbians be included under the umbrella of multiculturalism in the field of counseling. With this inclusion apparent in the professional codes of practice, programmatic accreditation, and a variety of multicultural counseling texts (e.g. Sue & Sue, 2007; Lee, 2006; Vacc, DeVaney, & Brendel, 2003), Israel and Selvidge (2003) described the inclusion of sexual orientation in the landscape of counselor education pedagogy. “Multicultural counseling and lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) counseling have developed fairly independently from

each other and are, at times, pitted against each other in a battle for inclusion in counselor education curricula” (p. 84). Conceptualizing bisexuals, lesbians, and gays as a cultural group and included as part of multicultural counseling courses, Kocarek and Pelling (2003) generalize teaching practices in multicultural counselor education stating that “MCT [multicultural counseling training], in general, often involves didactic teaching about MC [multicultural counseling] or a certain cultural group” (p. 101). Research has situated such training about LGB groups within a known model of multicultural counselor training which incorporates pedagogy around knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Israel & Selvidge, 2003).

The findings of the current study support and critique these pedagogical and scholarly practices in several ways. The inclusion of gay populations in multicultural counseling frameworks of practice and training certainly seems valid based on the discourse present in the current data. Both youth and family participants constructed experiences around collective experiences that they defined as culture. Cultural induction was also part of the reverse socialization processes that were observed and reported. While the framework of multiculturalism is appropriate for one aspect of the lived experiences of these families in the current study, the totality of their experiences as they were reported would seem to exceed the purview of multicultural education. In addition, an educational model incorporating knowledge, skills, and attitudes seems inadequate to address the breadth of complexity that was represented by the four families in the study. For the participant families, the sexual orientation of a child proved to be only one aspect of their collective experiences. Given this finding the scope of knowledge, skills, and

attitudes that comprise at least some multicultural education frameworks would seem necessary but perhaps not sufficient to facilitate competency.

Family counselor training, perhaps out of necessity based on the inherent nature of the client population, has embraced and incorporated multiple levels of complexity in pedagogy including multicultural education through the work of Nancy Boyd Franklin and others (McGoldrick, 1998). "In the late 1970's and early 1980's, a new gender lens was being developed" by authors such as Rachel Hare-Mustin and Betty Carter (p. 13). This "gender lens" initiated the recognition and critique of patriarchy in the therapeutic community as was evidenced in the leadership, theory, and counseling technique of the time. The current study along with its roots in other research applies a lens of sexuality to the consideration of pedagogy and practice, a lens that is unfortunately lacking in counselor education research and scholarship. Those authors who have applied a sexuality perspective to the training and practice of family counseling, Linda Stone-Fish, Anthony D'Augelli, Jerry Bigner, and Ritch Savin-Williams and others cited in this manuscript, are performing scholarship in disciplines such as Human Ecology, Human Development, and Social Work. While professional organizations such as IAMFC and the Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, & Transgender Issues in Counseling are providing ethical guidelines for practice and outlets for scholarly discourse in the field of Counselor Education, the question that remains is "Where is the research?" Can we as Counselor Educators engage in education around knowledge, skills, and attitudes when as a professional discipline we are not generating that knowledge from a perspective that is uniquely our own?

These questions along with the discussion preceding them support the formulation of the following implications of the present study for the field of Counselor Education.

1. Research and scholarship regarding queer youth and their families as well as queer individuals in general needs to be increased within the field.
2. Issues of sexuality and gender should not be pedagogically bound to specific courses and units within Counselor Education curricula.
3. Education around queer issues in counseling should be based in multicontextual conceptualizations as well as multicultural ones.
4. As with feminism and family counseling, critical and other conjectural frameworks should be incorporated into practices and coursework designed to help students develop a theoretical orientation. Integrative approaches to client and case conceptualization should be facilitated and encouraged.
5. Faculty in Counselor Education programs across counseling specialties should take measures to enhance their own knowledge and awareness of social trends, practices, language, and contemporary scholarship not only by looking within but also outside of their own discipline and scope of interest.

In order to understand and appreciate the complexity of the lived experiences of our clients, as practitioners and scholars we must first recognize the complexity in our own lives. We cannot effectively educate and train sensitive and aware counselors unless we embody those qualities ourselves. Without the genuine and intentional pursuit of those qualities, the danger of reenacting the social victimization that initiated the present inquiry on our students and our clients remains an ever present risk.

Researcher Reflections & Conclusion

As I complete this research and reflect on the past year, I come away with not only a feeling of accomplishment but also feeling of pride and hope. The families that I met and got to know during the course of this experience can be described as nothing less than phenomenal. In my view this description can be largely attributed to four incredible young people that I had the pleasure and privilege to know. Part way through the sampling and data collection process I had the revelation that in essence I was asking young people to sit down with their parents and talk about sex! This would certainly be a tall order for me even at my stage of life. Upon this realization, I not only realized what a monumental task I had undertaken, but also the courage that those youth and families that agreed to engage in this process with me truly possessed. I was gratified during the follow up interviews I conducted with the youth participants, that each one made a point to acknowledge how different yet rewarding the conversations that had emerged during the interviews were for them. I hope that in some way the process had a positive impact on everyone involved. It certainly did for me. I take away a deeper understanding not only of those experiences of my participants, but of my own experiences as a gay man embedded in a family system of my own.

This project has not only refined my knowledge and skill as a qualitative researcher, but has given me deeper insight into the meaning of scholarship and its relationship to educational and clinical practice. This study provides me with a deeper understanding of how postmodern schools of thought can inform not only future research, but my work with clients and students. I continue to be intrigued and excited by the interplay of disruptive theory with known and established frameworks. The energy I

have found through this work has initiated a foundation for scholarship and I hope to have the opportunity to continue this inquiry so as to address the limitations of the current effort as well as broaden the scope of these findings. I have found this research to be important. My hope is that the findings and discussion reported from this study inspire others to explore the complexities of family systems, particularly those of queer youth and their families.

In conclusion, the outcomes of this research extend beyond the multitude of thoughts, ideas, interpretations, and constructions that have comprised these pages. From my view, these findings add to the existing body of research which collectively has only begun to construct a rubric through which a more complex world can be understood. Gay youth are a catalyzing source of social change as they resiliently disrupt and challenge accepted ways of thinking and being for themselves, their families, and their communities. To nurture and appreciate this disruption is not only an act of empowerment but an act of social justice, which combats the very “cultural victimization” that initiated this inquiry. Perhaps the “nurturance of disruption” is the grounds where humanistic counseling practice and radical queer critique meet. On these grounds the “self” is claimed, a gain that is not a solitary pursuit but as the findings in this study would suggest, a collective achievement.

- parent-child relations among gay and lesbian youth. In K. A. Pillemer, & K. McCartney (Eds.), *Parent-child relations throughout life* (pp. 59-92). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Butler, J. (1997). Against proper objects. In E. Weed & N Schor (Eds.), *Feminism meets queer theory* (pp. 1-30). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Carter, B. & McGoldrick, M. (2005). *The expanded family life cycle: Individual, family, and social perspectives (3rd ed.)*. Boston: Pearson.
- Cass, V. C. (1979). Homosexual identity formation: A theoretical model. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 79(4), 219-235.
- Cohler, B. J. (2005). Backward socialization and gay identity negotiation in families. In V. L. Bengtson (Ed.), *Sourcebook of Family Theory & Research* (pp. 155-156), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Coleman, E. (1982). Developmental stages of the coming-out process. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 25 (4), 469-482.
- Connolly, C. M. (2006). A process of change: The intersection of the GLBT individual and his or her family of origin. In J. Bigner (Ed.), *An Introduction to GLBT Family Studies* (pp. 5-22), New York: The Hawthorne Press, Inc.
- Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs (2001). *2001 standards*. Retrieved June 2008 from <http://www.cacrep.org/2001Standards.html>.
- Creswell, J. W., Hanson, W. E., Clark, V. L., Morales, A. (2007). Qualitative research designs: Selection and implementation. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 35(2), 236-264.
- Creswell J. W. (2003). Research design: *Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods*

- approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Creswell J. W. (1994). Research design: *Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Daly, K. (1992). The fit between qualitative research and characteristics of families. In J. F. Gilgun, K. Daly, & G. Handel (Eds.), *Qualitative methods in family research* (pp. 3-11). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- D'Augelli, A. (2006). Stress and adaptation among families of LGB youth: Research challenges. In J. Bigner (Ed.), *An Introduction to GLBT Family Studies* (pp. 135-157), New York: The Hawthorne Press, Inc.
- D'Augelli, A.R. (1991). Gay men in college: Identity processes and adaptations. *Journal of College Student Development*, 32 (2), 140-146.
- D'Augelli, A., & Hershberger, S. (1993). Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth in community settings: Personal challenges and mental health problems. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 21, 421-448.
- D'Augelli, A. R., Hershberger, S. L., & Pilkington, N. W. (1998). Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth and their families: Disclosure of sexual orientation and its consequences. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 68, 361.
- Davey, M. P., Askew, J., & Godette, K. (2003). Parent and adolescent responses to non-terminal parental cancer: A retrospective multiple-case pilot study. *Family Systems & Health*, 21(3), 245-258.
- Denzin, N. (1989). *The research act*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Introduction: Entering the field of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 1-17). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Derogatis, L.R., & Spencer, P.M. (1982). The Brief Symptom Inventory: Administration scoring, and procedures manual. Towson, MD: Clinical Psychometric Research.
- Doran, G., & Downing Hansen, N. (2006). Constructions of Mexican American family grief after the death of a child: An exploratory study. *Cultural diversity & ethnic minority psychology, 12*, 199-211.
- Erlandson, D. A., Harris, E. L., Skipper, B. L., & Allen, S. D. (1993). *Doing naturalistic inquiry: A guide to methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Gall, M. D., Gall, J. P., & Borg, W. R. (2003). *Educational research: An introduction (7th ed.)*. New York: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Glesne, C. (2006). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction (3rd ed.)*. New York: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Glick-Schiller, N., Crystal, S., & Lewellen, D. (1994). Risky business: The cultural construction of AIDS risk groups. *Social Science & Medicine, 38*(10), 1337-1346.
- Green, R-J. (2000). Lesbians, gay men, and their parents: A critique of LaSala and the prevailing clinical wisdom. *Family Process, 39*(2), 257-266.
- Haverkamp, B. E., & Young, R. A. (2007). Paradigms purpose, and the role of literature: Formulating a rationale for qualitative investigations. *The Counseling Psychologist, 35*(2), 265-294.
- Hazelrigg, Cooper, & Borduin (1987). Evaluating the effectiveness of family therapies:

- An integrative review and analysis. *Psychological Bulletin* 101(3), 428-442.
- Herek, G., & Berrill, K. (1992). Documenting the victimization of lesbians and gay men: Methodological issues. *Hate crimes: Confronting violence against lesbians and gay men* (pp. 270-286).
- Hunter, J. (1990). Violence against lesbian and gay male youths. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 5(3), 295-300.
- International Association of Marriage & Family Counselors (2005). Revised ethical codes and standards. Retrieved June 2008 from http://www.iamfc.com/ethical_codes.html.
- Israel, T & Selvidge, M. M. D. (2003). Contributions of multicultural counseling to counselor competence with lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling & Development*, 31 (2), 84-98.
- Jacobs, J., & Freundlich, M. (2006). Achieving Permanency for LGBTQ Youth. *Child welfare*, 85, 299-316.
- Johnson, S. M. & Boisvert, C. (2002). Treating couples and families from the humanistic perspective: More than symptoms, more than solutions. In D. Kane (Ed.), *Humanistic Psychotherapies*, pp. 309-338. Washington, D.C.: APA Press.
- Kocarek, C. E. & N. J. Pelling (2003). Beyond knowledge and awareness: Enhancing counselor skills for work with gay, lesbian, and bisexual clients. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling & Development*, 31 (2), 99-112.
- Kubler-Ross, E. (1969). *On death and dying*. New York: McMillan.
- Lampropoulos, G. K. (2001). Bridging technical eclecticism & theoretical integration: assimilative integration. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration*, 11(1), 5-19.

- Lee, C. (Ed.) (2006). *Multicultural issues in counseling: New approaches to diversity (3rd. ed.)*. Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.
- MacDonald, G. B. (1983). Exploring sexual identity: Gay people and their families. *Sex Education Coalition News, 5*, 1 & 4.
- Manning, K. (1997). Authenticity in constructivist inquiry: Methodological considerations without prescription. *Qualitative Inquiry, 3*, 93 –115.
- Marecek, J. (2001). Bringing feminist issues into therapy. In B. D. Slife, R. N. Williams, & S. H. Barlow (Eds.), *Critical issues in psychotherapy: Translating new ideas into practice*. (pp. 305-320). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- McGoldrick, M. (Ed.). (1999). *Re-visioning family therapy: Race, culture, and gender in clinical practice*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Merighi, J. R., & Grimes, M. D. (2000). Coming out to families in a multicultural context. *Families in Society, 81*, 32-41.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1973). *The prose of the world*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Moon, S. M., Dillon, D. R., & Sprenkle, D. H. (1991). On balance and synergy: Family therapy and qualitative research revisited. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 17*(2), 187-192.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Nichols, M. P. & Schwartz, R. C. (2001). *Family therapy: Concepts and methods (5th ed.)*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Pilkington, N., & D'Augelli, A. (1995). Victimization of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth

- in community settings. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 23(1), 34-56.
- Pope, M. (2004). Sexual minority youth in the schools: Issues and desirable counselor responses. *Vistas: Perspectives on counseling*. Retrieved June 2008 from <http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/vistas04/4.pdf>.
- Pope, M. (1995). The "salad bowl" is big enough for us all: An argument for the inclusion of lesbians and gay men in any definition of multiculturalism. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 73, pp. 301-304.
- Plummer, K. (2005). Critical Humanism and Queer Theory: Living With the Tensions. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research (3rd ed.)* (pp. 357-373). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Radkowsky, M., & Siegel, L. J. (1997). The gay adolescent: Stressors, adaptations and psychosocial interventions. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 17, 191-216.
- Rivers, I., & D'Augelli, A. R. (2001). The victimization of lesbians, gay, and bisexual youths. In A. R. D'Augelli, & C. J. Patterson (Eds.), *Lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities and youth: Psychological perspectives*. (pp. 199-223). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Robinson, B. E., Walters, L. H., & Skeen, P. (1989). Response of parents to learning that their child is homosexual and concern over AIDS: A national study. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 18(1/2), 59-80.
- Rosenberg, M. (1979). *Conceiving the self*. New York: Basic Books.
- Rossmann, G.B., & Rallis, S.F. (2003). *Learning in the field: An introduction to qualitative research (2nd ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Saltzberg, S. (2004). Learning that an adolescent child is gay or lesbian: The parent

- experience. *Social Work*, 49(1), 109-118.
- Sanchez, R. M. (2004). *Youth perspectives on permanency*. Oakland, CA: California Permanency for Youth Project.
- Savin-Williams (2005). *The new gay teenager*. London: Harvard University Press.
- Savin-Williams & Dube (1998). Parental reactions to their child's disclosure of a gay/lesbian identity. *Family Relations*, 47(1), 7-13.
- Schwandt, T. A. (2007). *Dictionary of qualitative inquiry (3rd ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Schwandt, T. A. (2001). *Dictionary of qualitative inquiry (2nd ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Schwandt, T. A. (1994). Constructivist, interpretivist approaches to human inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 118-137). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Stake, R. E. (2003). Case studies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.) *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry (2nd ed.)* (pp. 134-164), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Stone Fish, L., & Harvey, R. (2005). *Nurturing queer youth: Family therapy transformed*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.
- Sue, D. W. & Sue, D. (2008). *Counseling the culturally diverse: Theory and Practice (5th ed.)*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Suzuki, L., Ahluwalia, M., Arora, A., & Mattis, J. (2007). The pond you fish in

- determines the fish you catch: Exploring strategies for qualitative data collection. *Counseling Psychologist*, 35(2), 295-327.
- Troiden, R. R. (1989). The formation of homosexual identities. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 17, 43-73.
- Vacc, N. A., DeVaney, S. B. & Brendel, J. M. (Eds.) (2003). *Counseling multicultural and diverse populations (4th ed.)*. New York: Brunner-Routledge.
- Van Manen, M. (1990). *Reseraching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. London, Ontario, Canada: The State University of New York Press.
- Wadsworth, B. J. (1989). *Piaget's theory of cognitive and affective development* (4th ed., pp. 9-31). Longman: New York.
- Waldner and Magruder (1999). Coming out to parents: Perceptions of family relations, perceived resources, and identity expression as predictors of identity disclosure for gay and lesbian adolescents. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 37(2), 83-100.
- Wilkins, P. (2000). Unconditional positive regard reconsidered. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 28(1), 23-36.
- Wolfe, B. E. (2001). A message to assimilative integrationists: It's time to become accommodative integrationists: A commentary. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration*, 11(1), 123-131
- Yingling, L. C., Miller, W. E., McDonald, M. S., & Galewaler, S. T. (1998). GARF assessment sourcebook: Using the DSM-IV global assessment of relational functioning. Washington, D.C.: Taylor & Francis.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

REQUEST FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

WHAT?

This research study is a qualitative exploration of the relationships among the members of families of gay youth. The purpose of this study is to explore aspects of relationships such as communication, closeness, and emotional expression. Existing research in this area is lacking in terms of exploring these aspects with intact family systems. The outcomes of this research project will inform counselors and others who work to support the needs of families and young people about the common and possibly unique experiences of gay youth and their family members. The researcher will purposely select up to four families from a pool of applicants to participate in this study. This research will focus on telling each family's perceptions and interpretations of their collective lived experiences.

WHY?

Atypical family stressors are among the areas of cultural victimization suffered by gay youth (Rivers & D'Augelli, 2001). While authors suggest that disclosing a non-heterosexual identity to parents and family can be a salient turning point in a young person's identity development (Savin-Williams, 1994) and that support from parents can help alleviate other forms of cultural and social stressors (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993), Rivers and D'Augelli (2001) cite a number of research studies that suggest that the family environment does not always provide the foundation needed for gay youth to thrive. Taking these concepts in concert, one recognizes the tension between the social factors that shape the family system and the relational factors of that very system that shape the lives of adolescents. For gay youth, the resolution of this tension may be the difference between thriving and suffering. The dichotomous tension between the family and the larger society not only gives a greater degree of depth to the problem, but also suggests potential means to seek resolution. Within the relational context of families may lay the negotiation of this tension.

WHO?

Participants in this study will be families, in which one member, age 18-22, has disclosed to their family that he or she is gay. Youth participants must be over the age of 18 and must have disclosed their sexual orientation to participating family members within six months of applying to participate. All family members interested in participating in the study must sign the application form in order to be eligible. Once a pool of participants is obtained, families will be selected to participate based on recommendations from previous research in this area, which has called for increased diversity in research samples particularly in terms of the race, class, and gender of research participants. The researcher conducting this project is **Greg Meek**, PhD Candidate in Counselor Education at the College of William & Mary. Greg can be contacted at

HOW?

In order to explore the relational processes in families of gay youth, the proposed study will employ a qualitative approach and conceptualization of the research problem. Upon obtaining informed consent from all participant family members, the researcher will conduct family interviews in an emergent style, with questions arising from and building on the responses of participants. A total of two 60-90 minute interviews will be completed with each participant family. These interviews will take place in the family's home or another agreed upon location that is comfortable and convenient for the family. In addition, a 30 minute follow-up interview will be conducted with the identified gay youth. Families will be asked to bring physical representations of their family to the interview sessions, and a discussion of these items will be included into the interview.

Appendix B

Researcher As Instrument Statement

This project presents several areas of initial reflection for me as the researcher. As a gay man, once a gay youth, I enter into the realm of this study bringing my own constructions of family experiences and relationships. Also being an experienced counselor with a history of working with both gay and straight youth ages 18-21 brings another level of perspective to what I will learn over the course of this research. Finally, my status as a student and my role as a researcher inform my experiences as well as those of the families who elect to participate in this study. These roles and experiences have shaped my beliefs about relational processes in families. Coupled with my beliefs about research, my constructions of my own sexuality will form my approach to my topic. In an effort to bracket my these constructions, I will expand on my relationship to my research within the context of myself as a qualitative researcher and in turn as an instrument of my research.

My constructions of sexuality began as a child. Growing up in a small town in Virginia I learned at an early age what was expected of men versus what was expected of women. These lessons did not come through any type of rote or didactic means, but rather through observations of my environment and interactions with others. Reflecting back on my experiences as a child, I felt different from others, particularly other boys, but not in a way that I would have identified or articulated. Passing for straight became an avenue to gain acceptance socially and in my family. Coming out to myself and to others came much later in life for me. Presently I engage in this research project as an out gay

man. These experiences have certainly led to my interest in this project, as well as the ways in which I enter into this research.

My desire to pursue this line of inquiry not only stems from my own personal experiences, but from educational and related professional experiences as well. As a master's level counselor working in higher education I had the privilege to work with both men and women who did and sometimes didn't identify themselves as gay or lesbian. The courageous nature of these young women and men consistently made an impression on me over the years. In my most recent experience as a doctoral student I have had the opportunity to expand my scope of practice to work with family clients. This experience has exposed me to the notion of systemic processes and influences, which I have not only applied to client cases but to my experiences in my own family of origin. In addition, doctoral study has exposed me to critical worldviews, particularly those posited by feminist and queer bodies of theory. The dissertation study I plan to carry out is the culmination of these experiences, combining my interests in sexuality, family systems, and theory with an approach to inquiry that I have found new and exciting to consider.

My beliefs about research and the role of research in education and human services also seem to be an important consideration as I approach this study. Educationally, I was first exposed to research methods as an undergraduate psychology major. I actually conducted a small scale correlational study at that level. I complete research and statistics coursework in graduate school as well. Unfortunately, during these academic experiences, conducting and consuming research was not emphasized or promoted. In my current program, research is most definitely of greater importance.

Now more than ever before, I have come to understand the importance of research not only in academic circles but for practitioners as well. Having stated my experiences and beliefs, I come to this research project feeling like a novice, but very eager to learn and participate. I feel certain that this experience will be challenging, but also hope it will be rewarding.

All of the information I have provided in this statement defines my stance as a qualitative researcher investigating the relational processes in families of gay youth. As an instrument of my study, I bring my values and beliefs about this topic to the research design and process. The topic holds a significant level of importance to me as a counseling professional, and elements of my professional identity are tied to this topic. Therefore, my investment in the outcomes of the study is significant. I approach this investigation with a great deal of curiosity and hope. As I incorporate myself into the design of this research and become an instrument of this inquiry, my overriding hope is that my experience and ideas will prove useful and supportive to the process of qualitative discovery.

Appendix C

Sample Reflexive Journal Entries

Friday, 2/8/08

Conducted my first interview with Yasai and his family this evening. Our original meeting location turned out to be unavailable so we travelled to Yasai's house which he shared with his partner. Initially I explained the study and interview process and solicited questions. There were none. Before starting the recorder I obtained signatures on the informed consent documents from Yasai and his mother. I sensed a bit of reluctance from his mother at the beginning of the interview but she seemed to be more than willing to share once we got started. We met in the living room of the home, which was comfortable. I sat by Yasai on the sofa and his mother sat across from us in a rocking chair. I became a bit concerned as we began the interview as the family seemed reluctant to discuss the topic at hand. Frequently when asked about aspects of relationships, Yasai and his mother would deflect the question by sharing a negative aspect of their family experience. Typically these negative experiences were related to Yasai's older brother or his stepfather. Much of the discussion was about incidents of harassment and abuse that both Yasai and his mother had experienced in their home. Midway through the interview Yasai's partner came downstairs. He had been sleeping and was just waking up to go to work. Eventually, as the conversation continued, the partner became engaged in the process and I obtained informed consent from him to participate. This interview was longer than previous ones, as the family seemed to want to continue sharing experiences well past the hour mark. At the close of the interview I asked the family to bring an artifact that represented them to the next session. I elaborated and explained this request. After the recorder was turned off, Yasai's partner along with Yasai and his mother gave me a tour of the home. Yasai's partner showed me many family antiques and heirlooms and told me a great deal about his family history and family or origin. Yasai's mother chimed in frequently. We made plans to meet again next weekend. I will check with Yasai via email mid week to confirm a day, time, and place.

Wednesday, 2/13/08

Contacted Yasai via email to inquire about a date and time for our next family interview.

Thursday, 2/14/08

Yasai replied suggesting Saturday, 2/16, at 5 p.m., at his house. I replied with a confirmation.

Saturday, 2/16/08

Met with Yasai's family for our second interview this evening. Prior to starting the recorder, I asked Yasai to complete the family information sheet and select a pseudonym. I also explained the transcription and member checking process and told Yasai to expect interview transcripts...

Appendix D

Family Information Sheet

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research study exploring relationships in families of gay youth. This sheet will provide you with information about the study as well as collect information about your family. Some of this information will be used to facilitate communication between the researcher and participants while other items will be included in the data reporting process. Please read this information thoroughly and complete the items as requested. Please feel free to contact me by email or phone with your questions. Thank you for your interest.

I. Researcher Information: Greg Meek
 Doctoral Candidate, College of William & Mary
 gsmeek@wm.edu
 757-345-1555

II. Description of the study

This study will explore relationships in families of gay youth. The goal of the study is to obtain rich descriptive information about these families. Eligible participants include gay youth, their parents, guardians, siblings, and any extended family members who hold a significant position in the youth's life. Non-biological or kinship family members are also welcome to participate at the discretion of the youth participant. In addition, participants must be willing to participate in a family interview and discuss their relationships with the interviewer and each other. During this interview, families will be asked about the experiences, thoughts, and relationships, particularly as they relate to having a gay child, sibling, grandchild, etc. as a member of the family. Youth will be asked to participate in a follow-up interview to expand on their experiences. Measures to ensure the anonymity of participants will be in place for this study.

III. Youth Information

Pseudonym _____ Age _____

Preferred contact _____

IV. Family Information

Please list the family members you would like to participate with you in this research and complete the requested information. Attach additional sheet(s) as needed.

Relationship

How long "out" to this person?

V. Family Contact Information

Below, please list one or more email addresses and/or U.S. mail addresses that can be used as a family contact. These addresses will be used to distribute interview transcripts and other study information.

VI. Family Demographic Information

Provide only information that you are comfortable providing. Leave blank items you don't wish to respond to or that are for any reason not applicable

From the list below, please circle the descriptors that you attribute to your family:

Single parent Middle class Racially mixed Multi-ethnic

Buddhist African American Jewish Single father

Disabled Poor Islamic Black

Wealthy Non-English speaking Christian Asian

Hispanic Single mother Non-white Caucasian

Immigrant European Upper middle class Latino

List any other descriptors or categories that you attribute to your family that are not listed above (attach an additional sheet if necessary):

Appendix E Interview Guide

Interview 1:

Introduction: The initial discussion will involve rapport building and establishing a relationship. General information about the interview process will be shared. The informed consent document will be reviewed and pseudonyms will be selected. The focus of the first interview will be on how the participants understand their family and family relationships, particularly within the context of having a gay youth as a family member.

Question: Tell me about your family.

Topic Guide: Impact of sexuality on family relationships

The “coming out” experience

Patterns of communication

Perceptions of close vs. distant relationships

Emotional expression within the family

Conclusion: Interview 1 will conclude with a brief verbal summary of what was discussed as a form of member checking. Interview 2 will be scheduled. The family will be asked to bring 1 or more items that represent their family and their relationships to the second interview.

Interview 2:

Introduction: The second interview will begin with a brief review and summary of the previous interview and member checking will occur as needed and appropriate. The participants will be asked to share their artifact(s) which will lead into the primary topic of the second interview. This interview

will focus on how present and historical aspects of family relationships and how social factors have impacted family dynamics.

Question: Tell me about the item(s) you brought in and how it represents your family.

Topic Guide: Perceptions of past, present, and future

Influence of having a gay child or sibling on the family's future

Social concerns and discrimination

Religion and spirituality

Changes in family values and belief systems over time

Conclusion: Interview 2 will conclude with a brief verbal summary of what was discussed as a form of member checking. Sincere thanks will be conveyed to the family for their participation and any remaining questions and concerns will be addressed. A third and final interview with the youth will be scheduled.

Interview 3:

Introduction: The final interview will begin with a summary of the highlights from the previous two interviews particularly as they relate to the participation and contributions of the youth. Member checking will occur as appropriate. The third interview will focus on the youth's understanding of her or his family based on the information obtained during interviews 1 and 2.

Question: Tell me about your experience as a participant in this research process.

Topic Guide: Salient moments during interviews 1 and 2

Supportive family experiences

Transformative family experiences

Conclusion: The researcher will express their appreciation to the participant for participating in the interview process. Any remaining questions and concerns will be addressed.

Appendix F

Consent Form

Consent for Participation Form
Exploring Relational Processes in Families of Gay Youth

I, _____, agree to participate in a phenomenological study involving families of gay youth. The purpose of this study is to explore aspects of relationships among the selected families. The researcher has purposely selected four families from a pool of applicants. I understand that the research will focus on telling the participants' interpretations of their lived experiences.

As a participant, I understand the intention of this study is to explore my understanding, ideas, and perceptions of my experiences as a family member. I understand that I will be expected to participate in two interviews and in some cases an additional follow-up interview, each lasting 60-90 minutes. I agree that I will read and review summaries of the information generated during the interviews to check them for accuracy and intent. I have been informed that any information obtained in this study will be recorded with a pseudonym (a fictitious name) of my choosing that will allow only the researchers to determine my identity. At the conclusion of this study, the key linking me with the pseudonym will be destroyed. I also acknowledge that individual discussions will be audio taped to ensure accuracy of the information presented. At the conclusion of the study, all tapes will be erased and recordings will be deleted and will no longer be available for use. All efforts will be made to conceal my identity in the study's report of results and to keep my personal information confidential.

I understand that I do not have to answer every question asked of me, and I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in this study at any time by informing one of the researchers in person, by telephone or email. If I have any questions or problems that arise in connection with my participation in this study, I should contact Dr. Rick Gressard, the faculty director of this project, at 757-221-2352, cfgres@wm.edu, or Dr. Thomas J. Ward, the chair of the Protection of Human Subjects Committee at the College of William and Mary in the School of Education at 757-221-2358, tjward@wm.edu.

My signature below signifies that I am least 18 years of age, that I have received a copy of this consent form, and that I consent to participating in this phenomenological study.

Date

Participant

Date

Investigator

VITA

GREGORY S. MEEK

4452 Eaglebrook Drive • Williamsburg, VA 23188 • /757/345-1555 • gsmeek@wm.edu

EDUCATION**PhD, Counselor Education (July 2008)**

The College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, VA

Cognate: Family Counseling

Dissertation: Exploring Relational Processes in Families of Gay Youth

Honors & Awards: Kevin E. Geoffroy Memorial Fellowship Endowment 2007-08
Honors Designation on Doctoral Comprehensive Examinations

MEd, Counseling Psychology (May 1994)

James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA

Concentration: College Student Personnel Administration

BS, Psychology (December 1989)

James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA

Minor: Sociology

SCHOLARSHIP***Research in Progress***

- Constructing the Counselor Educator: Implications for Pedagogy & Practice (Meek, Foster, Keel, Wyatt, & Wyatt, 2007)
- Exploratory Factor Analysis of Counselor Identity (Meek, Fujikura, & Wyatt, 2007)
- New Horizons Family Counseling Center Research Initiatives

Conference Presentations

- *Relational Processes in Families of Gay Youth*, VCA (11/08).
- *Constructing the Counselor Educator: Implications for Pedagogy & Practice*, ACES (10/07).
- *Working with Multi-Stressed Supervisees: Implications for Assistance and Gatekeeping in Educational Settings*, Third International Interdisciplinary Conference on Clinical Supervision (6/07).
- *Postmodern Approaches to Counseling Sexual Minority Clients*, VACES (2/07).
- *Broaching Gender Roles in Family Counseling*, VACES (2/07).
- *The Construction of Feminist Identity and Male Counselors*, SACES (9/06).

TEACHING EXPERIENCE**Co-Instructor: College of William & Mary**

- EDUC 635 Advanced Theories & Techniques of Family Counseling, Spring 2007/08

Teaching Assistant: College of William & Mary

- EDUC 647 Doctoral Internship in Counselor Supervision, Spring 2008
- EDUC C42 Supervised Practicum in Community Counseling, Spring 2006/07/08

- EDUC 627 Marriage & Family Counseling, Spring 2007/08
- EDUC C49 Supervised Internship in School Counseling, Fall 2007
- EDUC 639 Theory & Process of Counselor Supervision, Fall 2007
- EDUC 624 Multicultural Counseling, Spring 2006/07
- EDUC C33 Techniques of Counseling, Fall 2006

DOCTORAL EXPERIENCE

Research Assistant, New Horizons Family Counseling Center, College of William & Mary (8/07-present)

Family Counseling Intern, New Horizons Family Counseling Center, College of William & Mary

Doctoral Supervisor, Counselor Education, College of William & Mary (1/06-present)

Counseling Intern, Richmond Organization for Sexual Minority Youth, Richmond, VA (5/06-9/06)

CAREER EXPERIENCE

Associate Dean of Student Life, Mary Baldwin College, Staunton, VA (7/01-8/05)

Academic Advisor & Career Specialist, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA (4/00-7/01)

Associate Director for Career Counseling, Mary Baldwin College, Staunton, VA (7/94-4/00)

Counselor in Residence, Psychological Services, Mary Baldwin College, Staunton, VA (11/98-4/00)

Academic Advisor, Mary Baldwin College, Staunton, VA (8/96-5/98)

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

- American Counseling Association
- Association for Counselor Education & Supervision
- Association for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender Issues in Counseling Virginia Counselors Association
- Virginia Association for Counselor Education & Supervision
- Southern Association for Counselor Education & Supervision

REFERENCES

Dr. Rick Gressard
Associate Professor
Counselor Education
School of Education
College of William & Mary
Williamsburg, VA 23187
crgres@wm.edu
757-221-2352

Dr. Victoria Foster
Professor
Counselor Education
School of Education
College of William & Mary
Williamsburg, VA 23187
vafost@wm.edu
757-221-2321

Dr. Johnston Brendel
Associate Professor
Counselor Education
School of Education
College of William & Mary
Williamsburg, VA 23187
jmbren@wm.edu
757-221-2328