COMING OUT: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF LGB COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO FEEL SUPPORTED BY THEIR PARENTS

Eric W. Price, M.A.

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APPROVED:

Elizabeth Prosek, Major Professor
Leslie Jones, Committee Member
Peggy Ceballos, Committee Member
Casey Barrio Minton, Committee Member
Jan Holden, Chair of the Department of Counseling and Higher Education
Bertina H. Combs, Interim Dean of the College of Education
Victor Prybutok, Vice Provost of the Toulouse Graduate School
The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how LGB college students created meaning out of their coming out process to their parents. I recruited LGB college students who perceived support from their parents during their coming out process and asked the following research question: What are the lived experiences of LGB college students who have experienced support from their parents during the coming out process? Seven White (n = 4), African American (n = 2), and Hispanic (n = 1) college students, three men and four women aged 18-24 years, shared narratives that included time periods before, during, and after their coming out disclosures to their parents. Using an adapted phenomenological analysis, I identified nine major themes: awareness of feeling different, positive relationship with parents prior to coming out, college impacting the coming out process, feeling unsure of how parents would respond to disclosure, parents assuring continued loved and acceptance, parents affirming LGB identity, increased relational depth with parents, increased sense of authenticity, and an appreciation for family's response and support. The findings provide insight into how counselors might work most beneficially with LGB college students and their parents around the coming out process. Opportunities for future research and limitations of the study are discussed.
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By

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“The Doc Program” has been quite the adventure with so many laughs, tears, successes, setbacks, times I felt like I wanted to quit, and times I felt like I was exactly where I needed to be. I would not have made it without the support of my family, friends, and mentors. To my parents – thank you for providing opportunities for me when I was a child to grow up in a good home while learning the value of hard work and education. To Bryan and Lisa – I love you both and couldn’t have asked for a better brother and sister. To my best friend Lora – thank you for reminding me to make space for fun and laugher— you inspire me to look on the bright side of life. To Dr. Elizabeth Prosek –I’m so grateful that you encouraged me to persevere throughout this dissertation when I considered changing my study. Thank you for your constant support. To Dr. Leslie Jones – you were always there to tell us not to take on too much. Thank you for being the faculty member who truly encourages self-care. To Dr. Peggy Ceballos – I so appreciate your genuineness and authenticity and will always remember co-teaching with you! To Dr. Casey Barrio-Minton, I’m so grateful you stayed a part of my process from afar! I admire your passion for teaching and advocacy and hope to inspire others like you have inspired me. To Dr. Bryce Hagedorn – you were instrumental in my development as a counselor during my master’s program and I likely would not have pursued doctoral work without your encouragement. And finally, to my beautiful cohort family – Cynthia, Sahar, Josh, Sara, Terence, Tessa, Alyssa, and Carly – we’ve been through so much during the past three years and I’m grateful we were in this journey together. I will love and treasure you all forever.
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THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF LGB COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO FEEL
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Gates (2011) estimated that 3.5% of adults in the United States identified as
lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) and approximately 11% of Americans experienced some
type of same-sex attraction during their lifetimes. Although society has become more
accepting of sexual minorities, LGB individuals continue to face discrimination in today’s
world (Harper & Schneider, 2003).

Various identity models depict the sexual identity development process in
different ways. Early models conceptualized the coming out process as a series of
sequential stages (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989) whereby individuals become aware of
same gender attraction, explore ways to make meaning of that sexual attraction, form
relationships with others, and adapt to a new way of life by understanding how sexuality
influences their identity. Other models described coming out as an unfolding process
throughout the lifespan (D’Augelli, 1994), or as “milestone events” that influence the
formation and integration of sexual identity (Floyd & Stein, 2002, p. 167). More recently,
multidimensional identity models also account for cultural considerations, such as
gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status (Glover, Galliher, & Lamere, 2009; Jamil,
Harper, & Fernandez, 2009). Although coming out is often cited as a key moment in
one’s sexual identity development (Corrigan & Matthew, 2003; Heatherington & Lavner,
2008), scholars have disagreed with how to define and conceptualize this process.

Much of the literature related to the coming out defines the phenomenon as the
process whereby an LGB individual discloses their sexual orientation to others
(Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Waldner & Magruder, 1999). Conversely, others
described coming out as an ongoing and lifelong process whereby LGB individuals decide whether to disclose their sexual orientation every time they meet someone new (Appleby, 2001; Morris, 1997). Mohr and Fassinger (2003) linked the construct of self-acceptance as an LGB individual to the coming out process, explaining that sexual minorities also come out to oneself. Rust (2003) seemed to capture the complexity of coming out by describing it as “the process by which individuals come to recognize that they have romantic or sexual feelings toward members of their own gender, adopt lesbian or gay (or bisexual) identities, and then share these identities with others” (p. 227).

Orne (2011) acknowledged the importance of social context by re-terming coming out as “strategic outness” (p. 682). Orne argued LGB individuals come out using multiple strategies in how they share their sexuality based on various motivations for controlling who knows about their sexuality, and the importance of social context in their decision-making to disclose. He concluded that coming out is not only related to identity formation, but also identity management whereby LGB individuals simultaneously live inside and outside of the closet as they make decisions about coming out to new people.

Individuals choose to come out to others in a variety of ways. Manning (2015) identified seven types of coming out disclosures including: pre-planned, emergent, coaxed, confrontational, romantic, educational/activist, and mediated. Manning believed the manner in which one chooses to come out could influence future relational factors.

As LGB individuals manage their identity, many choose to keep their identity a secret out of fear of possible rejection. Much of the previous literature focused on the
impact stigma (Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, & Gwadz, 2002), discrimination (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009), and rejection (D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998) have upon the well-being and adjustment of LGB individuals. As a result, many LGB individuals encounter minority stress and experience mental health concerns. King et al. (2008) conducted a systematic review of the prevalence of mental disorders in the LGB population and found LGB individuals were twice as likely to attempt suicide, 1.5 times more likely to abuse substances, and 1.5 times more likely to report symptoms of anxiety and depression than heterosexuals. Furthermore, LGB youth and young adults face additional struggles as they decide whether to disclose their sexual identity to their parents.

People choose to come out to their parents for a variety of reasons including wanting to live an honest life, strengthen communication and love, and create more opportunities for mutual support (Ben-Ari, 1995a). As they contemplate coming out to their parents, LGB youth often feel alienated from others due to the hetero-normative nature of the world, anxious prior to sharing their sexual identity with their parents, and relieved after coming out because they could live a more authentic life. They also believed that self-acceptance, and “being sure” (p. 474) they were gay were an important factor before coming out to their parents (Perrin-Wallqvist & Lindblom, 2015).

Coming out to one’s parents is often associated with rejection, discrimination, and victimization, resulting in high levels of emotional distress within LGBT youth (Almeida et al., 2009). Rejecting parental responses are often associated with traditional family values (Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993), rigid family structure (Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006), conservative political views (Baiocco et al., 2015), and controlling
environments that limit one’s autonomy (Legate, Ryan, & Weinstein, 2012). LGB individuals who come out in unsupportive family environments often report internal sexual stigma, low self-esteem (Baoicco et al., 2016), suicidal ideation (D’Amico, Julien, Tremblay, & Chartrand, 2015), and substance abuse (Pearson & Wilkinson, 2013). Therefore, it might not always be in the best interests for LGB youth to come out to their parents if the disclosure could put their emotional and physical safety at risk (D’Augelli et al., 1998).

Although the vast majority of previous literature focused on the correlation between hardships of the LGB community and mental health (Bouris et al., 2010), some authors have studied the benefits of support from family members on an LGB person’s identity and well-being. Parental acceptance predicted greater self-esteem, social support, and overall health status while protecting against depression, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation (Ryan et al., 2010). Additionally, parental acceptance can serve a moderator between homonegativity and minority stress and depression (Feinstein et al., 2014).

Many LGB individuals who are unsure of whether their parents will reject them or offer support struggle because living in secrecy can also be detrimental to mental health (D’Augelli, 2002). For that reason, many individuals who perceive risks at home choose to wait until college to reveal their sexual identity to their parents.

LGB individuals who perceived the environment as safe perceived less threats of victimization and therefore were more comfortable living open and authentic lives (Evans & Broido, 1999). Stevens (2004) conducted a grounded theory analysis to explore how the college environment contributes to the sexual identity development of
Stevens identified finding empowerment as the central category of the model whereby his sample relied on their internal feelings as they moved from self-acceptance toward identity integration within the campus culture. Stevens agreed with Evans and Broido (1999) and found the college environment provided a safe context whereby LGB individuals explore ways they could disclose their sexual orientation to others and learn how to make meaning of identifying as gay.

Brandon-Friedman and Kim (2016) conducted an exploratory, cross-sectional study that examined the effect of five contexts of social support on identity development. The five domains of social support included joining a campus pride group, friends, family, significant others, and faith communities. They concluded that involvement in campus pride groups was the strongest predictor of sexual identity development, followed by support from family members. Although Brandon-Friedman and Kim (2016) concluded parental support is important for LGBT college students, they did not offer any specific strategies related to what these support strategies from family members might entail.

Although the current base of research offers evidence that sexuality-related parental support is beneficial for LGB adolescents and young adults, empirical research is lacking about how parents offer their support (Bouris et al., 2010). Understanding parental sexuality-related support could help mental health clinicians better understand the experiences of LGB college students who are considering coming out to their parents. Additionally, with new insights into the nature of sexuality-related support, counselors could help foster supportive relationships between LGB individuals and their parents. The purpose of this study was to understand the phenomenon of moving away
to college, coming out as LGB, disclosing sexual identity to one’s parents, and perceiving support related to their disclosure. The following research question guided my methodology: What are the lived experiences of LGB college students who felt supported by their parents during the coming out process?

Method

Phenomenology is a qualitative method designed to help researchers understand how individuals create meaning from experience and understand their social world (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The overall purpose of phenomenology is to describe an experience from the point of view of those who have experienced that phenomenon. Researchers aim to capture the essence of an event by examining individual experiences and finding commonalities among the different perspectives (Starks & Trinidad, 2007).

Recruitment and Participants

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board, I recruited participants locally, nationally, and internationally through word of mouth, professional contacts, emails to LGB university groups throughout the country, and social media posts. Potential participants responded to a demographics survey that included questions pertaining to their (a) gender, (b) age, (c) race/ethnicity, (d) geographical location, (e) religiosity as a child, (f) current religiosity, (g) whether they are enrolled at a college or university, (h) sexual orientation, (i) the age at which they first internally acknowledged they identified as LGB, (j) whether they disclosed to their parents they
were LGB in college, living at a different address, and felt supported in their disclosure, (k) which parent was supportive, and (l) the age at which they disclosed their sexual identity to their parents.

Using purposive sampling (Hays & Singh, 2012), I selected participants who were between the ages of 18-24 years old and currently enrolled in an undergraduate program. I also chose participants who identified as cisgender and lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Furthermore, to capture the experience of individuals who chose to wait until they were in college to come out to their parents, participants must have made the disclosure during the college experience and had not been living with their parents during the time of the disclosure. Finally, participants must have experienced support related to their sexual identity from at least one parent.

Starks and Trinidad (2007) suggested smaller sample sizes of 1-10 participants could provide enough details of a phenomenon to convey the core elements of the experience. A total of 37 individuals responded to the initial demographics survey. However, only nine of the respondents met all of the criteria needed to participate. One respondent did not return my phone call to participate in the study. Another respondent initially agreed to participate, but cancelled due to personal reasons. Therefore, the final sample consisted of seven participants who were diverse in gender, race, and geographic location. Participants selected pseudonyms in order to protect confidentiality. Additional information about participants is provided in Table 1.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Age Came out to Self</th>
<th>Age Came out to Parents</th>
<th>Supportive Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AJ</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jo</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Spiritual not religious</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mariah</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>12/13</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Mid Atlantic</td>
<td>16/17</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosie</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Spiritual not religious</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Agnostic</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Both</td>
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Data Collection

I developed a semi-structured interview guide that included a set of structured questions with the added flexibility to ask clarifying or follow up questions (Patton, 2002). To ensure questions were tailored to capture a specific phenomenon but not so specific that participants felt led to give specific responses, I constructed questions that were clear and precise with minimal bias (Moustakas, 1994; Hays & Singh, 2006). Seidman (2006) encouraged phenomenological researchers to ask questions related to reviewing life history, exploring present-day experiences, and discovering how they made meaning of those experiences.

Questions pertaining to life history asked participants’ to reflect on their process of self-identifying as LGB (Cass, 1979; Troiden 1989), their relationship with their parents prior to their disclosure (Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl. 2006), and reasons for making the disclosure (Ben-Ari, 1995a). Questions pertaining to the details of the phenomenon asked the participant to share their experiences during and after the disclosure to their parents, perceptions of their parent’s responses, and how being in college influenced the overall experience. Finally, questions pertaining to meaning-making focused on how participants understood their coming out process. All interviews were conducted via Skype and audio-recorded. After the interview, the audio files were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist and double-checked for accuracy.

Researcher Reflexivity

The research team included myself (a White, gay male doctoral candidate), two additional doctoral students (one White, gay male and one White, heterosexual female),
one advanced Master’s student (an Iranian, bisexual female), and a supervising researcher (a White, heterosexual female) who served as an assistant professor at the researchers’ institution.

Before starting the data analysis process, the research team engaged in the process of *epoché*, a Greek word meaning “to stay away from” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). Consistent with the phenomenological tradition, the research team members sought to identify and suspend current beliefs and judgments related to the phenomenon of coming out to one’s parents (Hays & Singh, 2012). To accomplish this task, members of the research team reflected on their previous knowledge and experiences related to the coming out process (Moustakas, 1994). In a reflexive journals, members of the research team reflected on their previous experiences, beliefs, assumptions, and biases related to LGB college students coming out to their parents. The research team shared their belief that parents who are religious, conservative, or from rural areas could be less supportive than parents who were non-religious, liberal, or from urban areas. Additionally, they expected support to include active listening and statements which affirm unconditional love. The research team processed their reflections together and worked to bracket their beliefs to disengage past experiences and limit how their own views cloud their understanding of the participants’ responses (Moustakas, 1994). The research team also revisited their journals and discussed their biases throughout the data analysis process.
Data Analysis

The research team used an adapted version of classic data analysis developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014). The research team began to develop the preliminary codes using three transcripts that were selected based on diversity in gender, sexuality, and experience. In the first step, taking notes, each member of the research team independently read the three transcripts. As they read, they divided the transcriptions into ten line segments and wrote notes related to their initial reactions in the margins. In the second step, summarizing notes, team members shared their reactions to the material and compared their written notes. The research team discussed commonalities and differences between their findings and developed a summary sheet based on their perspectives. Then, during the playing with words task, the research team used the summary sheet to create phrases that captured their understanding of the patterns across the three transcripts. Then, the research team made comparisons as they re-examined the key phrases and grouped them into different themes and sub-themes. The research team engaged in the process of horizontalization whereby they reduced the data by combining similar phases into common themes that became the preliminary coding manual (Creswell, 2013).

After the research team developed preliminary codes, they began the process of initial coding. Each team member independently applied codes to the initial first three transcripts. After individual coding, the research team discussed differences between their codes and made adaptations to the coding manual. The research then independently re-coded the initial three transcripts and an additional fourth transcript. The research team met again to discuss discrepancies and readjust codes until they
reached a mean agreement of .92, a level of agreement greater than Bakeman and Gottman’s (1986) recommendation of .86 - .90 agreement.

During final coding, the research team applied the final coding manual with each of the remaining interviews. Each transcript was independently coded by all four members of the research team. After meeting to discuss discrepancies, I calculated the inter-rater agreement between all the coders for all seven transcripts. Overall, the research team agreed 96% of the time, and therefore established credibility (Bakeman & Gottman, 1986).

After the research team finished the coding process, I sent a summary of the codes to participants to ensure the themes adequately described their lived experiences. Five of the seven participants responded to my request. After reading the summary, their comments included: “everything resonated with my experience,” “you really captured our conversation,” and “these impressions are very representative of a college student’s coming out process.” One participant also said after the interview they remembered their parents had also helped them come out to extended family members. Although this theme was not specifically reflected in the results, other participants shared their parents provided support when extended family were not affirming.

Trustworthiness

Morrow (2005) outlined four strategies to increase trustworthiness and rigor in qualitative studies: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I strengthened credibility by engaging in triangulation with three other research team members, facilitating the process of research reflexivity and epoche with the research
team, and conducting member checks. I encouraged transferability by sharing as many
details as possible about the setting of this study, myself as the researcher, the
research team, and participants’ demographics. By providing this information, readers
can make an informed decision of how to apply the findings to other contexts. I
demonstrated dependability by interviewing participants until the research team sensed
we had reached saturation (Hays & Singh, 2012). I kept an audit trail of all research
activities throughout the entire process of conducting this study as I worked closely with
my research supervisor. I also plan to share details about my methodology in any
manuscripts related to my work so researchers could replicate the study in the future.
Finally, I ensured confirmability by taking steps to limit biases, meeting with the
research team to reflect on experiences, and discussing how biases could be
influencing our data analysis. I also integrated the process of triangulation (Hays &
Singh, 2012) whereby I included multiple researchers and multiple data sources to
ensure readers will perceive this study as trustworthy.

Results

Nine themes and thirteen sub-themes emerged from the data analysis as
displayed in Figure 1. Prior to coming out, participants shared two themes (awareness
of feeling different, positive relationship with parents prior to coming out) and four sub-
themes (compelled to keep sexuality hidden from others, fear of persecution due to
religion, culture, or environment, intimate relationship with parents prior to disclosure,
and parents were open-minded). During college, participants shared one major theme
(college experience impacted the coming out process) and three sub-themes
(experienced newfound freedom and autonomy, normalization of LGBTQQIA culture, and desire to be fully known by parents).

Figure 1. Theme summary.

With regard to the coming out disclosure itself, participants shared three themes (participant was unsure of how parents would respond to coming out disclosure, parents assured continued love and acceptance during and after disclosure, and parents
affirmed LGB identity during and after disclosure) and six sub-themes (feeling anxious before and during coming out disclosure, disclosure was unplanned or spontaneous, parents asked intentional questions to learn more about their child and the LGB community, parents were welcoming toward their child’s potential partners, parents encouraged their child regarding experiences of fear or discrimination, parents performed acts of service that promoted child's expression of LGB identity). In the time following their coming out disclosure, the participants shared three themes (increased relational depth with parents after coming out, increased sense of authenticity after coming out to parents, and appreciation for family’s response and overall support).

Theme 1: Awareness of Feeling Different

All seven participants shared they went through a period of recognizing they felt different from their peers as they internally recognized they identified as lesbian or gay. Their feelings varied in scope and intensity as some participants reported distressing experiences whereas others navigated the process easily. One participant shared:

> Internally, it felt like I had to readjust everything that I thought about myself, Because in high school, I was just never interested in boys, but I never thought anything of it, because I was just like they’re a distraction. (Jo)

Some of the participants also shared they felt different because they noticed the lack of visibility and exposure to other LGBTQQA individuals in their lives and community.

> It was just that year was a blur because I was so stressed and so I did not know what to do. I had no one to turn to. I didn’t know anyone else who was gay or who was in the queer community, so I was just so distraught, and I had nowhere to turn it felt like. (Natalie)

As the participants shared their internal coming out experiences, two sub-themes emerged: concealing their identity (n = 7) and feeling afraid of possible persecution (n =
6). All seven of participants reported a period of time where they felt unsure of who they were, and whether they could share their feelings with others. Participants discussed what it was like denying their sexuality while coming to terms with their feelings.

I disregarded all those feelings and convinced myself that I wasn’t gay. Then in 11th grade I started to realize that I was different and classified myself as bisexual, even though I realized that I still never had a lot of straight feelings. (Tom)

Others shared experiences of keeping their identity hidden from others as they believed they had to keep their identity a secret from their parents and others.

Around the time that I started figuring out I was gay, I actually came up with this little convoluted story that I had a crush on a girl in school so that she [Mom] wouldn’t have any suspicion because I was well aware that she wouldn’t take it well. (AJ)

Participants’ narratives seemed to reflect a process whereby they recognized they felt anxious as they pondered what coming out would mean for themselves and their relationship with others.

For all but one participant, this process was influenced by feeling afraid of how others would respond based on their religion or environment.

My mom was and still is very religious. She is Christian, so just growing up, we didn’t really talk about homosexuality as it being kind of projected in mainstream media as Christianity being so anti-gay. We kind of just swept it under the rug, but I still knew that Bible teaches it as a sin, so when I first kind of said, “Oh crap, This might be…I might be gay,” I really suppressed that. (Natalie)

People already made fun of me for being gay, even before I knew what it was. I didn’t want it to be true, and so for a long time, I tried to pass it off as just as phase, or say, well maybe I was bi. (Michael)

As participants shared their reservations, they also discussed what their relationships were like with their parents before they disclosed their sexual identity to them.
Theme 2: Positive Relationships with Parents Prior to Coming Out

All seven participants reported positive qualities about relationships with their parents before coming out to them. Two sub-themes emerged related to the relationships: intimacy \((n = 6)\) and open-mindedness \((n = 4)\). Six participants reported they had very close relationships with at least one parent before coming out. Jo said:

> I guess they’ve always been there to see the achievements I’ve done, and they’ll make a point to come to things that are important to me, and sit down and take the time to talk to me about my day, and things like that. I feel like I’ve never questioned how much they care about me.

Others described open and understanding relationships with their parents that allowed them to be honest about what was happening in their lives.

> Oh God, I was a mama’s boy! Ever since I have a memory, I always was, I remember, trying to be as close as I possibly could with her. I told her everything, everything, everything. (AJ)

Participants seemed to have felt a genuine openness with their parents. As they described their parents, a sub-theme related to parents’ open-mindedness emerged. Four participants described their parents as being liberal or open to different lifestyles and worldviews.

> My family’s always been very socially liberal. My mum was raised in that kind of social liberal ideology. (Michael)

> When I went through my little Goth phase, my sister was like, “Oh, well. Okay lets recheck yourself,” and then my Mom was like, “No, she likes this, it’s fine,” and went and bought me jackets and buckles and chains, and everything was black. They were just like, “You know what, this is how you’re expressing yourself right now, let’s just go for it.” (Rosie)

Others added that their parents had prior experience with the LGBT community.

> He [Dad] used to have these three gay best friends. All their names were Dennis, which was weird, but whatever. They would call themselves “The Three Dennis’s.” They would come to my house; we would have dinner with them; they would sleep over. It wasn’t anything weird or out of the ordinary. They didn’t
pinpoint it as something you should be ashamed of; it’s just a part of you.  
(Mariah)

Although four participants perceived their parents as open-minded, and all seven described positive relationships with their parents, they all waited until they went to college before they came out to their parents.

Theme 3: College Impacted the Coming Out Process

All seven participants attested that leaving home and going away to college had a profound impact on their coming out process.

Then I went to college and then realized, “Oh, no. I definitely like girls in a relationship aspect.” I think it was freshman year of college, I was 18, when I was finally like, “Okay, no. This is a thing. This is who I am.” (Rosie)

I figured while I’m here, why not try it out and see what all the fuss is about. That’s when I met all the gay people and I made gay friends and I started dating someone and it was like, oh, okay, so maybe that is something that I really should let other people know, especially my family. (AJ)

AJ’s narrative provided insight into three sub-themes: finding newfound freedom and autonomy (n = 4), having exposure to LGBTQQIA culture (n = 6), and feeling an increased desire to come out and be fully known by parents (n = 5).

Four participants shared that going away to college afforded them independence that they would not have had while living with their parents. The distance away from their parents provided them with space to further discover and explore their sexuality.

One participant said:

There’s just that openness to figure out myself without having my parents there to help guide me, and I think that independence let me find myself faster than if I had my parents guiding me on some level. (Jo)
Not only did college offer space for the participants to feel more independent, but it also provided opportunities for them to interact with members of the LGBTQQIA community. Six participants talked about how college helped normalize LGBTQQIA culture. Participants shared experiences connecting with members of the LGBTQQIA community, which helped them to learn to appreciate diversity and accept their own sexuality.

I guess it wasn’t until college when I got some exposure to a lot of new people and new information about the LGBTQ community that I never was exposed to at home, I started to realize and come to terms that I’m gay. I just had to come out to myself before I could come out to other people. (Tom)

Mariah added that meeting others who have fully come out and embraced their sexuality made her want that experience for herself.

Once I came to college, you see all these people, especially as a freshman and looking at upper classmen, they’re out, they’re happy, they’re doing their internships, they’re doing this, they’re doing that. They’re just so open and it’s so cool and so awesome to see somebody who is like me being happy (Mariah)

Mariah’s experience of seeing others happy seemed to normalize her sexuality.

As they shared their experiences coming out in college, five participants also shared they felt a desire to be more fully known by their parents. Some participants noticed they barriers between themselves and their parents while others discussed associations with campus LGBT organizations and wanted to share their involvement with their parents.

Once I figure something out, I need others to understand that this is part of me, and to hide that from my Mom was the hardest of this probably. (Jo)

I’m more excited to tell you [dad] of the things that I want to do with my Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) rather than my sexuality, because that really didn’t have anything to do with me. I want to help other people. That’s why I decided to run as a vice president. I mean of course it matters that I’m gay, but I want to share the work that I’m doing with you. (Natalie)
Overall, it seemed that going away to college and becoming more comfortable in their own sexuality was a motivator for the participants to come out to their parents. Although most participants felt close with their parents, they did not know how their parents would respond.

Theme 4: Participant was Unsure of How Parents WouldRespond to Disclosure

Five of seven participants reported they did not know how their parents would respond before they disclosed their sexual identity. Some of them shared:

You don’t know they are going to react. I didn’t know if they were going to be upset that I didn’t tell them sooner or upset that I was kind of lying. (Mariah)

Even though I grew up in a super open family, there’s always, I feel like with Anyone that comes out to their family, there’s always that … but it’s different when it’s your own kid or your sister, or your son or whatever. (Rosie)

Two sub-themes emerged as a result of participants’ uncertainty: anxious feelings before and during their disclosure ($n = 7$) and coming out in unplanned or spontaneous ways ($n = 6$).

All participants said they felt anxious before or during their coming out disclosure, including participants who felt close to their parents and believed their parents were open-minded. Some anxiety occurred as the participants contemplated telling their parents about their sexual orientation.

I guess the nervousness came from the mystery behind “well this could go really, Really good or this could go really really bad” and they could maybe not understand and not accept me” (Tom)

I knew that they were super open, but I was still really scared. I don’t know. They didn’t really have an inkling of a clue so I knew it was definitely going to be a surprise for them. (Mariah)

For others, anxiety felt most present during the coming out conversation itself.
My heart was racing. I remember quite strongly. I felt anxious and wasn’t sure if I wanted to do it, but I just kind of went through with it. (Michael)

Because it’s different when it’s your kid and in your house, so I did panic a little bit. My heart was pumping out of my chest and I was like, “Okay, Okay this is fine. It’s really cool.” (Rosie)

For all but one participant, disclosure to parents was unplanned or spontaneous.

Some of the participants made the disclosures casually.

I went home that weekend and I was like “Hey,” and I just showed them a picture. It was like, there was filter at Pride on Snapchat and it says “When you’re out and you’re proud” and I just showed them a picture with that filter on me. (Rosie)

Natalie also came out casually when she wanted to tell her father that she was elected to be the vice-president of her Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) group.

I got it, and I was super excited, and I’m like “Oh crap. Why am I the vice president of GSA if I’m straight? Wait, I’m not,” so I decided to tell my Dad. “Hey Dad this is what’s up. Um, I’m the vice president of GSA, and I’m also gay.” (Natalie)

Jo said her disclosure was also unplanned as her mother asked about her sexuality.

She’s like, “The only thing I might have a hard time adjusting to is if you were gay.” And I just started crying, and she was like, “Oh my God, are you gay?” I was like, “I don’t think I’m straight,” and she was like, “I take it back. I don’t mean it. I don’t mean it. I love you so much.” We just laughed and I cried. It was all good, and she’s been one my greatest champions through all this (Jo)

Although Jo’s mother seemed surprised, she was also quick to offer her love and support. As the participants continued to share their coming out stories, several themes emerged related to how their parents offered support.

Theme 5: Parents Assured Unconditional Love and Acceptance During and After Disclosure

All participants reported that their parents reassured them that they still loved and accepted them, regardless of who they loved.
They were silent for a second and then my Dad said, “Okay, we don’t really care. Whomever you want to date is who you want to date. That doesn’t change the way we feel about you. That doesn’t change the way we think about you. You’re still our daughter, we still love you. Everything is the same. You don’t have to hide from us anymore.” It was really awesome. (Mariah)

They acknowledged that they aren’t going to treat me any differently. They acknowledged that this isn’t a choice. They acknowledged that they still love me and they’re always there for me. (Tom)

Others added their parents told them they wanted their child to find happiness and nothing in their relationship would change.

He said that, “Your sexuality doesn’t matter to me. What matters is that you find someone that makes you happy, and that you find happiness within yourself.” (Natalie)

Some parents continued to express unconditional love and support even after the disclosure.

My mother always says that she prays for me, and it’s great to know she doesn’t pray anymore for me to not be gay. She prays for me to be happy which I think is really nice and lovely. (AJ)

They would send me little text messages like, “We love you, we’re here for you. We hope you’re happy.” All this stuff. Them being there, even though they weren’t always physically with me…them saying they were with me on the phone, over a text, it made me feel like I had some support. (Mariah)

Overall, parental expressions of love seemed to provide the participants with a sense of support. Beyond communicating love and acceptance, the participants also felt supported when parents took other steps to affirm their sexual identity.

Theme 6: Parents Affirmed LGB Identity Before and After Disclosure

All participants described ways their parents affirmed and normalized their sexual identity during and after the initial coming out disclosure. Some parents were willing to talk about taboo subjects related to sex and relationships.
I still talk to her very, very often now about literally everything. She asks about My sex life which was a total shock for me, just she did, and I told her and our Relationship didn’t change or shift whatsoever when I came out to her. (AJ)

Others said coming out was not a big deal because their parents talk about sexual orientation very casually.

It’s just who you are. They didn’t make a huge deal out of it like, “Oh my gosh, you’re gay.” All this crazy stuff. They were just super cool about it and super low key about it because I don’t a reminder every day of “Oh yeah, Mariah’s gay.” I know, you don’t have to keep telling me. I am happy and I’m proud of it, but it shouldn’t be a big deal. And I think that’s something my parents did really well. They didn’t keep bringing it up. They let it be what it was. (Mariah)

My Mom makes jokes like yesterday I told her, I was like, “Oh, yeah. Remind me to call this guy at noon,” and I explained, “Yeah, he’s doing this thing for his dissertation,” so she set the alarm for “Rosie, call because you like girls.” They play it off like it’s no big deal. (Rosie)

In addition to talking about sexuality informally, other participants added that their parents revealed they had prior awareness of their child’s sexuality.

We told my Dad, and he just laughed, and he was like, “Well, you joined the Rubgy team. I just figured,” and I was like, “That was easy.” (Jo)

It seemed participants felt supported and accepted when their parents responded openly and casually. As participants discussed relationships with their parents, four sub-themes surfaced that revealed more specific strategies parents used to affirm their children’s LGB identity: asking intentional questions (n = 2), welcoming potential partners (n = 5), providing encouragement during difficult experiences (n = 5), and performing acts of service that promote LGB identity (n = 3).

Although it was not a dominant theme in this analysis, two participants appreciated times their parents asked specific questions to further understanding of their child and the LGBTQIA community. AJ recalled a meaningful conversation with his mother.
We had not spoken about it yet since we had spoken about it on the phone, and we had already been in the same house for a week, so one night I go out to walk the dog, and she comes out with me. This is a big deal because my mother has really bad legs. They hurt her all the time. She offered to come walk the dog with me, so I knew that this was going to be huge. (AJ)

AJ said that during the walk, his mother asked him questions about how long he had known he was gay, what it was like to be attracted to other men, what “type” of men he liked, how sex works, what gay clubs, drag shows, and pride festivals are like, and how he lives his life as a gay man. AJ said he was thankful for his mother for asking him questions.

I just felt so comfortable explaining it to her because I could tell that she was genuinely curious and not just trying to find a weak spot in an argument that I was trying to make or trying to disagree with me. She just genuinely wanted to know. (AJ)

Five of participants said they felt like their parents were accepting and welcoming toward their potential partners.

And I am dating somebody. “Our door is always open for whoever you’re dating.” Anytime my girlfriend comes over, they give her a huge hug and they ask her how she’s doing. It just makes me feel like they really care about how I feel and my emotions toward the situation. (Mariah)

I brought my first boyfriend home for Christmas last year. The relationship didn’t last, but certainly he was welcomed with open arms by the family who was there at Christmastime. (Michael)

Participants seemed to feel supported as parents normalized their sexuality by having conversations about partners and inviting them as members of the family.

Five participants shared examples of feeling supported when their parents encouraged them through experiences of fear or discrimination. Rosie recalled a time her parents checked in due to current events in the news.
I came out before the Pulse shooting happened. My family had just moved to Orlando. I remember them calling me and they were panicking. They were like, “Did you know anybody there?” (Rosie)

Some of the participants shared that their parents were willing to stand up for them to other family members.

They were always telling me, “We’re here for you if you anything happens. We’ll always be by your side. We don’t care what anyone else in the family thinks or says. We have you.” Them being emotionally there for me regardless of what other people in my family might think or say really meant a lot to me. (Mariah)

Others felt encouraged during experiences of blatant discrimination. AJ and Michael shared experiences of being discriminated against in their places of employment.

Of course the first thing I did was call my mother, and she was just extremely supportive, and she tried to empathize as much as she could. She has a small business and she has always been like, “My workers are like family to me. I can’t believe he did that to you. You are better than this. You don’t need him. He is totally mistaken.” (AJ)

We considered taking legal action. I filed a complaint with the [organizational department], which oversaw the organization for discrimination on who I was, both my relationship to my father and my sexuality. My parents supported me through that. (Michael)

Three participants also described times their parents went beyond encouragement to perform an act of service that affirmed their unconditional support for their sexual identity. For example, Michael and Natalie said:

I was leading the chapter of my fraternity DLP (ΔΛΦ) in the actual celebrating that year was that was 2013. I didn’t have enough money on my own to take the round trip, so my Dad got me a train ticket and then a bus ticket. They knew it was for Pride, so I guess I would consider that fairly supportive, proof that they were fairly supportive. (Michael)

All those social issues are important. I feel like my Dad and I canvassing and building that connection through that made it stronger, if that makes sense. We really built a connection, and we even became closer realizing that we had almost identical political views without even discussing it. (Natalie)
Natalie experienced a sense of newfound sense of closeness with her father after coming out to him. This experience seemed common with other participants as well as many described having more relational depth with their parents.

Theme 7: Participant Experienced Increased Relational Depth with Parents after Coming Out

All but one participant described feeling closer to their parents after coming out. They believed they could be more open and honest with their parents and noticed their parents also were more open with them as well.

It felt nice to stop hiding things from her, because I was also going through a little Mini heartbreak breakup thing, and my Mom would be the person that I would have told about it. In my mind, I couldn’t tell her about it, because she didn’t know I was gay yet. It was like opening up our normal relationship to come back into play. (Jo)

The little things now that they point out that they would’ve said to me about guys before they knew. They do it with girls. It’s not like a weird thing that they’re stepping on eggshells. It’s just like, “Oh, have you met any new girls lately?” (Rosie)

As they talked about being open, AJ and Mariah added they felt a sense of relief they could finally be themselves with their parents.

When we got home again, I just went to my room and I just wanted to cry of happiness. I was so happy. I felt like literally there were no secrets. Me and my Mom were the same person and we were on the same page. (AJ)

I felt so relieved. It was just nice to be able to talk about whatever I wanted to talk about. Fully being me. I don’t even know else to say it. It’s just who I am! (Mariah)

As participants described feeling closer to their parents, they also seemed to notice themselves feeling more whole and authentic in other settings.
Theme 8: Participants Experienced Increased Sense of Authenticity

Five participants shared after they came out to their parents, they felt more authentic with themselves and in contexts outside of the family system.

Having that support from my family was really important because not it just makes it easier to be me around other people because I’m like, “Well, whatever you say, I know that my family backs me 100%” (Rosie)

Michael and AJ added they felt more confident after they came out to their parents.

Because of being gay, because of being a smaller stature, not always athletic as I am now, I always dealt with kind of an inferiority complex. Certainly the support from my parents helped that. (Michael)

I feel stronger as a person. My personality has evolved a lot. I used to be extremely shy and reserved because of course, there was something reserved and to be shy about. I don’t know. I feel like I’m a pretty open person, and I try to be as honest as possible can. (AJ)

Others said they felt more connected to their own identity as a member of the LGBTQQIA community.

I feel like it made me more accepting of myself and it made me more able to tell people. Now, I don’t care if someone asks me. I’ll say, “Yeah I’m gay. I have a girlfriend.” Whatever. But before I was out to my parents, I would hide it.” (Mariah)

I’m becoming a free-thinking and like a free-moving, and I guess I’m just becoming an independent person of myself. (Natalie)

As participants talked about their growth, they also expressed gratitude for their experience.

Theme 9: Appreciation for Family’s Response and Overall Support

All participants shared they felt grateful for how their parents responded during the coming out disclosure and for their families as a whole. AJ, Jo, and Tom shared positive feelings as they reflected that they were thankful for their parents,
I still feel extremely appreciated because I know that they could pray to end world Hunger but instead, they are praying for me to just be happy, and I really don’t think there’s anything a son could ever ask for other than to just have their parents want them to be happy. (AJ)

It was really nice I guess. It made me cry. I might cry right now. It was very surprising, because I was definitely expecting a bad reaction. (Jo)

Overall, it went fairly well and I’m not really sure how else I could have done it differently besides at a different time. Overall I felt supported and I felt loved and I Was happy that they were there for me. (Tom)

Rosie and Natalie said the coming out process reaffirmed the overall importance of family in their lives.

I was like, “It doesn’t matter what any of my friends or peers think of me, because my family is the most important,” so it’s like, “I knew I would’ve had your support and that should’ve mattered most,” because I know that they’ll always support me and they’ll be the ones that’ll always be there for me no matter what. (Rosie)

It’s everything, honestly, because at the end of the day if something goes wrong, I know that I have at least one person in this world that I can turn to and who will support me regardless of anything that I do. It’s honestly, it’s everything that I have someone who is supportive. (Natalie)

Others also commented they were grateful for their experience because they were aware that others do not have supportive parents.

Oh my God, I am so lucky. I am so frickin lucky no one caught me when I was in Panama doing anything. No one caught me when I was in New York, and when I did come out, I was received. I wasn’t pushed away. I’ve seen what happens to the kids that get kicked out, and I’ve seen what happens to the people that get disowned by their family. (AJ)

I never realized how lucky I am, because some of my friends when they were teenagers, they were kicked out of their houses. I just feel like my coming out experience, I feel so lucky to have the experience that I have, to have two supportive parents, and friends that just have always supported me I guess. (Jo)

Finally, as they expressed gratitude, participants shared they were glad they waited until college to come out to their parents and would not have come out any other way.
Just looking back, I don’t think I would have changed anything that I did in terms of the coming out process to my parents. I think everything happened in its due time and I couldn’t have just... Given the nature of growing up in a small town... have come out any earlier before I had the experiences that I’d had in college. (Michael)

When I think back on it, it makes me really happy about how everything went down, how I went about it. I actually am happy that I waited until college to come out because I really don’t think I was ready in High School. I don’t know. I am just really happy about how everything went down. There is nothing that I would take back and nothing I regret about what happened. (Mariah)

Everyone in my life has been super supportive and super loving, so I’m very happy that I came out, and other than telling my parents at the same time, I don’t have any regrets from it. (Jo)

I wouldn’t do it any other way honestly. I feel like the way I came out was so important, and it was so necessary, because I wanted to share the work that I’m doing. (Natalie)

Overall, it appeared as though the participants were impacted by parental support before, during, and after their disclosure in several faucets of their lives. Furthermore, the process of attending college seemed very influential throughout these narratives as it served as the catalyst for them coming out to their parents.

Discussion

The emergent themes from this phenomenological analysis can be connected to previous literature that pertains to sexual identity development prior to coming out, the process of coming out in college, experiences of coming out to parents, and the long-term effects of parental support.

Participants’ experiences feeling different prior to coming out seem to reflect early stages described by sexual identity models, which describe how individuals become aware they identify as gay and compare themselves to others (Cass, 1979;
McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Troiden, 1989). Some participants mentioned these experiences were initially distressing due to a lack of visibility of other LGBTQIA individuals in their communities. The negative experiences expressed by participants seem to reflect previous findings that LGB young adults experience more stress, depression, and anxiety than their peers (Cochran et al., 2003; King et al., 2008; Prezedworski et al., 2015) and feel alienated due to the hetero-normativity of the world (Perrin-Wallqvist & Lindblom, 2015). The participants also shared they had a period of time when they denied their sexuality to themselves and kept their identity hidden from others because they were unsure of how others would respond as they feared persecution and rejection. Similarly, previous researchers suggested LGBT individuals who perceive potential risks in their environment might fear victimization and live less authentic lives (Evans & Broido, 1999; Schope, 2002).

Regardless of their struggles, all participants had positive relationships with their parents before they moved away to attend college. This theme connects to previous literature that found individuals from cohesive families perceived less negative reactions to coming out disclosures than individuals from disconnected families (Willoughby et al., 2006). Additionally, most participants perceived their parents as open-minded and liberal prior to disclosure. Similarly, researchers found parents with high degrees of cognitive flexibility were supportive of their children’s coming out process (Goodrich & Gilbride, 2010) whereas parents who expressed high degrees of political conservatism and religious involvement were less accepting of their children’s sexual orientation (Baiocco et al., 2015).
Participants all described how college impacted their sexual identity development. These experiences seem to reflect the middle stages of sexual identity models whereby individuals begin to seek contact with other members of the gay community as they develop more positive views of themselves (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982) and begin to develop a personal and social LGB identity (D'Augelli, 1994). College provided participants with a newfound sense of independence they would not have felt had they still been living with their parents. Similarly, previous researchers argued individuals in environments that support one's autonomy are more comfortable coming out (Legate et al., 2012). Furthermore, the narratives also seem to reflect Stevens’ (2004) grounded theory that claimed individuals feel a sense of empowerment to explore their identity in college because the environment feels safe.

Several participants also said college helped normalize LGBTQIA culture as they established friendships, joined student groups, became involved in advocacy projects, and developed romantic relationships. Previous researchers contended LGB college students develop a sense of belonging at a university through meaningful group members and authentic friendships with other members of the LGBT community (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Participants also seemed to perceive less environmental risks associated with coming out then they did when they were living at home with their parents (Evans & Broido, 1999). As participants became more involved in the gay community and comfortable with their own identity, they developed a desire to be more fully known by their parents. The connections between college students becoming open with their sexual identity, joining LGBTQIA campus groups, and expressing a desire to
share their involvement with their parents does not appear to be specifically reflected in the literature.

Although they had felt their parents had previously been open-minded and supportive, participants in this study were still unsure of how their parents might react to their disclosure, feeling anxious right before coming out and a sense of relief afterward. These feelings are consistent with prior research (Perrin-Wallqvist & Herdt, 2015) related to the coming out experiences of LGB youth to their parents. Furthermore, most (n = 6) of the participants said their coming out disclosure was either spontaneous or unplanned. Manning (2015) had previously described unplanned and emergent coming out disclosures in his typology, however, the theme related to college students coming out to their parents in spontaneous or casual ways does not seem to be addressed in previous research.

After coming out, all parents expressed unconditional love and acceptance for participants, expressed a desire for them to be happy, and normalized and affirmed their identity. There has been very little research related to how parents support LGB college students throughout the coming out process. Therefore, most of these findings are not reflected in the current base of literature.

Participants reported they noticed their relationship with their parents had more relational depth than before they had come out. They were more open and transparent with their parents and felt more secure in their relationship. This finding seems congruent with previous research that found individuals who feel limited in how they can express themselves with someone would also feel disconnected from that person (Ryan et al., 2015). After being accepted within the family, participants felt a greater sense of
authenticity outside of their family. For example, they felt more confident in themselves as members of the LGBTQIA community, and more comfortable coming out to others. These themes seem to reflect the final stages described in the various sexual identity models whereby individuals integrate their sexuality with other aspects of identity as they develop a healthy self-image (Cass, 1979, Coleman, 1982). Previous literature suggested LGB children who are supported by their parents develop higher self-esteem (Beauty, 1999) and express more self-confidence (D’Amico et al, 2015). However, previous literature has not yet supported the possibility that individuals who feel supported by their parents will feel more empowered to come out in other contexts.

Finally, all participants were appreciative of their overall coming out experience as they were aware others have not had supportive parents. Their parent’s support helped them reaffirm the value of family, and they were glad they came out in college and would not have changed anything about their coming out experience. This affirmation supports previous researchers that maintained many individuals prefer to wait until college until they come out (Rhoads, 1994). However, in previous literature researchers have not yet examined the connection between parental support and the overall sense of gratitude for one’s family.

Clinical Implications

Findings from this study can be applied to clinical practice and future research. Counselors working with LGB adolescents in rural areas without a significant LGBTQIA population might provide clients with space to make meaning out of their sexual identity (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). They could also provide psycho-
educational materials that would help normalize their experience of identifying as LGB (Medeiros, Seehaus, Elliott, & Melaney, 2004). College counselors who are working with LGB students could provide opportunities for their clients to process anxiety related to coming out to their parents. College counselors could help LGB individuals determine whether they are truly ready to disclose their sexuality to their parents. Counselors should be mindful that LGBT clients present with different experiences and backgrounds (Israel, Gorcheva, Walther, Sulzner, & Cohen 2008). It might not be in the client’s best interest to come out to their parents if they do not have a support system on campus, or if they have not previously felt supported by their parents (D’Augelli et al., 1998). Counselors should help clients navigate this decision-making process.

The current study revealed the importance of parents reassuring their child of unconditional love and support while affirming their LGB identity. If a parent is struggling with accepting their child’s sexuality, a counselor might help the client integrate their newfound knowledge of their child’s sexuality with the love they have for their child (Saltzburg, 2004). For example, a counselor could also help the client brainstorm ways to communicate the love they have for their child regardless of how they feel about their child’s sexuality. Counselors working with parents of LGB college students who want to be more supportive might consider helping them strategize ways that affirm their child’s sexuality. Counselors might facilitate role-plays with parents who are unsure how to facilitate conversations related to sex and relationships (Burgess, Dziegielewski, & Green, 2005), help parents readjust the expectations they had for their child’s prospective partners (Saltzburg, 2007), develop ways they could communicate a welcoming nature toward their child’s partner, and provide space for them to process
their own feelings related to their child’s life challenges while helping simultaneously helping them think of ways direct and indirect ways to offer support.

The results of this study might also be helpful for family therapists who are working with LGB college students and their parents. Some participants appreciated when their parents asked them specific questions because they wanted to learn more about their child, their coming out process, and the gay community. Family counselors could facilitate conversations where parents ask questions they have about their child’s sexuality, and the LGB individual has an opportunity to teach their parent about themselves and LGBTQIA culture. Also, the participants shared they experienced increased relational depth with their parents after they came out to them. Family therapists could facilitate activities in session that creates opportunities for both parties to share their experiences with each other maintaining a sense of trust (LaSala, 2000).

Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research

Throughout the study, I took steps to demonstrate rigor and ensure trustworthiness. Despite my efforts, this study had several limitations. First, I made a concentrated effort to recruit LGB participants who were diverse in terms of gender, race, sexuality, and geographical location. Although the sample was diverse in terms of gender, race, and geographical location, there were no bisexual participants in the sample. Therefore, the results from this study may not be applicable to bisexual individuals.

As I conducted interviews, I incorporated Seidman’s (2006) structure of asking questions related to life history, present-day experiences, and meaning-making
strategies. In the end, I only conducted one interview with each participant. Additionally, all interviews were conducted via Skype and were not face-to-face. During the interviews, I asked follow-up questions and believed each participant provided in-depth responses that reflected their experience. Furthermore, the research team sensed they had reached saturation during the coding process. Still, it is possible with face-to-face interviews or additional follow-up interviews that more depth could have been found.

Finally, the research team was not free from biases. The research team took intentional steps to limit the influences of their biases including keeping a reflexive journal, engaging in *epoche*, and bracketing our biases (Hays & Singh, 2012). Additionally, I performed participant member checks, and participants said the themes adequately described their experiences. Nevertheless, it is possible our personal biases still influenced the results of this study.

There are several opportunities for future research to expand on the results of the current analysis. The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of LGB individuals who moved away from home to attend college and came out to their parents. Future research might examine the experiences of individuals who did not attend college, or who were living at home at the time of the disclosure. Also, the sample of this study was intended to include individuals who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Unfortunately, none of the participants in the sample identified as bisexual and individuals who identified as asexual, pansexual, questioning, or transgender were not included. Future researchers might replicate this study to examine the lived experiences of other sexual or gender minorities who came out to their parents and perceived support. The study could also be replicated with samples from specific racial or ethnic
backgrounds to understand how parental support might be experienced differently across different cultures.

Another qualitative study could include interviews with both the LGB individuals and their parents to further assess strategies parents use to support their children throughout their coming out process. Researchers could also conduct a longitudinal study that examines perceived parental support over time. Finally, a quantitative study might examine the extent to which various parental support behaviors impact the participant’s sexual identity development and overall well-being.

Another finding suggested that individuals came out to their parents in ways that were spontaneous or unplanned. Although participants shared they wanted to be fully known, their motivations for coming out in a spontaneous manner were unclear. For example, did the individuals in this study come out spontaneously because deep down they expected their parents to be supportive? Furthermore, if LGB individuals think their parents could reject them, will they have a more planned or rehearsed method of coming out? Future researchers could examine how LGB individuals select the manner by which they come out to their parents, and if their strategy is related to an expected outcome. After coming out, individuals also expressed more confidence, a sense of relief, and willingness to come out in other contexts. However, did the participants feel this way because their parents supported them? Or, did they feel this way because they had completed a difficult milestone in their coming out experience? Future researchers could examine the relationships between coming out to parents, perceiving parental support, and feeling more authentic.
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APPENDIX A

INTRODUCTION
Many researchers have studied the struggles related to identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB). The majority of the literature focused on the impact that stigma (Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, & Gwadz, 2002), discrimination (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009), and rejection (D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998) have upon the well-being and adjustment of LGB individuals. The results of these studies indicated that LGB identity is often associated with increased mental health risks including depression, anxiety, substance abuse disorders, self-harm, and suicidal ideation. Other researchers examined these factors specifically with adolescents and young adults with regard to relationship to their parents (D'Augelli, 2002; Ryan et al., 2009). Although the vast majority of the literature focused on the correlation between hardships of the LGB community and mental health (Bouris et al., 2010) some authors have studied the benefits of social support from peers and family members on an LGB person’s identity and well-being. (Elizur & Ziv, 2001; Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001).

"Coming out" is often cited as a key moment in the development of one’s sexual identity (Corrigan & Matthew, 2003; Heatherington & Lavner, 2008). Rossi (2010) defined coming out as “the process by which one declares his or her identity to be homosexual, gay, or lesbian to family, friends, or significant others” (p. 1175). Various identity models depict the coming out process in different ways. Early models conceptualized the coming out process as a series of sequential stages (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1988) whereas others described coming out as an “unfolding process” throughout the lifespan (D’Augelli, 1994), or as “milestone events” that influence the formation and integration of sexual identity (Floyd & Stein, 2002, p. 167). More recently, multidimensional identity models also account for cultural considerations, such as

A central task of the coming out process involves disclosing one’s sexual identity to parents. Coming out to one’s parents is often associated with rejection, discrimination, and victimization, resulting in high levels of emotional distress within LGBT youth (Almeida et al., 2009). Yet, researchers have discovered that people choose to come out to parents for a variety of reasons including desiring to live an honest life, strengthening communication and love, and creating more opportunities for mutual support (Ben-Ari, 1995a). Ryan et al. (2010) found that perceived parental support predicted higher self-esteem and overall well-being whereas other researchers linked parental support with higher psychological adjustment (Elizur & Ziv, 2001; Fernstein, Wadsworth, Davila, & Goldfried, 2014). However, due to the possibility that others will reject their identity, many teenagers and young adults choose to wait until they move away to college to disclose that they are LGB (Rhoads, 1997; Stevens, 2004).

Young adults often explore their identity during the college experience. Although many students find a newfound sense of freedom, they also face new stressors, relationship difficulties, and developmental milestones as they transition into adulthood (Zubernis & Snyder, 2007). In general, researchers have found that the quality and quantity of positive parental interactions during a student’s first year of college contributes to their sense of well-being (Sax & Weintraub, 2014). However, researchers have not examined parental support for college students with regard to their coming out process.
Overall, there is a substantial dearth of literature regarding perceptions of support from LGB young adults. Although there are some studies that explain the benefits of support (Feinstein, Waldsworth, Davila, & Goldfried, 2014; Ryan et al., 2010), very few researchers described the details of that support. After a thorough literature review, no studies were found regarding the nature of sexuality-related support from parents as an LGB college student navigates the coming out process. This study is designed to explore, in more detail, parental support and positive experiences related to the coming out process.

Statement of the Problem

Many researchers have claimed that LGB individuals report higher rates of mental health concerns than heterosexual individuals report (Cochran, Sullivan, & Mays, 2003; D’Augelli, 2002; Otis & Skinner, 1996). King et al. (2008) conducted a systematic review of the prevalence of mental disorders in the LGB population and found LGB individuals were twice as likely to attempt suicide, 1.5 times more likely to abuse substances, and 1.5 times more likely to report symptoms of anxiety and depression than heterosexuals. LGB persons often report minority stress related to discrimination, prejudice, and stigma, which directly causes mental health problems for LGB individuals (Meyer, 2003). Furthermore, LGB youth and young adults face additional struggles as they disclose their sexual identity to their parents (Cramer & Roach, 1988). However, parental support related to one’s sexuality significantly impacts overall positive identity formation and self-esteem (Bregman et al., 2013). Yet, very few researchers have examined the experiences of LGB youth who perceive support from their parents. Given the higher prevalence rates of mental health symptoms among LGB
individuals, counselors and parents might not know ways of offering helpful sexuality-related support. More researchers could highlight ways that parents could promote the well-being of LGB youth throughout their coming out process (Bouris et al., 2010).

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the lived experiences of LGB college students who perceive their parents as being supportive of their sexual identity. Throughout this study, I hope to help define sexuality-related support for LGB adolescents and young adults following their coming out disclosures. Specifically, I will focus my research on support for college students because individuals are navigating the process of redefining their identity as they move away from home (Zunernis & Snyder, 2007). The following research question will guide my investigation:

RQ: What are the lived experiences of LGB college students who have experienced support from their parents during the coming out process?

Significance of Study

Multiple studies examined LGB identity (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Horowitz & Newcomb, 2001), the coming out process for LGB individuals and their parents (Feldman & Wright, 2013; Ryan, Legate, & Weinstein, 2015), the associations between perceived rejection of LGB identity and increased mental health risks (D’Amico, Julien, Tremblay, & Chartrand, 2015; D’Augelli, 2002), and the benefits of parental support for LGB adolescents and young adults (Brandon-Friedman and Kim, 2016; Nesmith, Burton, and Cosgrove, 1999) However, very few researchers have examined the nature of parental support for LGB adolescents and young adults. To my knowledge, no studies exist that explore the essence of parental support for LGB college students after
they disclose their sexual identity. I believe understanding the positive experiences could begin the process of developing support strategies for LGB college students. This knowledge will help guide parents who would like to be supportive of their LGB college students throughout the coming out process but might not know how to support them. Additionally, this study will assist mental health professionals in assisting parents to formulate new strategies that foster support for their LGB sons and daughters in college. The results of the study could help mental health professionals encourage a positive LGB identity and assist parents with supporting their LGB sons and daughters.

Conclusion

In chapter two, I will provide a detailed literature review that justifies a need for this study. I will begin my discussion with an overview of the LGB population and various sexual identity models. This section will include a detailed discussion about the coming out process from the lens of both LGB individuals and their parents. I will then discuss the role of support for LGB individuals throughout the coming out process, including the threats stemming from a lack of support, the benefits of support, and importance parents play for LGB young adults throughout the coming out process. Then, I will describe the coming out process within the college student framework. Finally, I will summarize related research. In chapter three, I will describe my methodology, a phenomenological approach, as I seek answers to my research questions.
APPENDIX B

EXTENDED LITERATURE REVIEW
In a glossary of terms provided by the Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Counseling (ALGBTIC, 2013), counselors defined gay as “a man who is emotionally, physically, mentally, and/or spiritually oriented to bond and share affection with other men” (p. 42); lesbian as “a woman who is emotionally, physically, mentally, and/or spiritually oriented to bond and share affection with other women” (p. 43); and bisexual as “a man or woman who is emotionally, physically, mentally, and/or spiritually oriented to bond and share affection with both men and women” (p. 41). In a research brief, Gates (2011) estimated that 3.5% of adults in the United States identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) and approximately 11% of Americans experienced some type of same-sex attraction during their lifetimes. Although society has become more accepting of sexual minorities, LGB individuals continue to face discrimination and other challenges in today’s world (Harper & Schneider, 2003).

LGB adults in the United States have a higher prevalence of psychological distress when compared to heterosexual adults. For example, Cochran, Sullivan, and Mays (2003) found gay and bisexual men report higher rates of depression, panic attacks, and overall psychological distress whereas lesbian and bisexual women report higher rates of general anxiety disorder (Cochran et al., 2003). Moreover, prejudice, rejection, discrimination, and violence is associated with a higher risk for depression within the LGB community (Otis & Skinner, 1996). King et al. (2008) recognized mental health risks and sought to quantify their impact on LGB individuals. They conducted a systematic review of 13,706 research articles related to mental disorders, self-harm, and suicidal ideation in the LGB community. The research team utilized rigorous
selection criteria to narrow down the studies to 28 articles that were research-based, quantitative, and controlled. After conducting a meta-analysis, they concluded that LGB people were 1.5 times more likely to demonstrate symptoms of depression, anxiety, or a substance use disorder than heterosexual respondents. Furthermore, they found that gay and bisexual men indicated higher rates for suicide attempts than all others in the sample whereas lesbian and bisexual women were at the highest risk for substance dependence (King et al., 2008).

In other studies conducted with LGB college students, researchers found additional risk factors associated with development and safety. In his book, Coming Out in College: The Struggle for a Queer Identity, Rhoads (1995) stated gay and bisexual college students struggle to develop a positive self-image as they learn about the campus environment and adapt to a cultural microcosm rooted in heterosexual norms. On campus, LGB college students choose to either remain silent about their identity to fit in with the campus culture, or be authentic and face potential rejection or violence from the campus culture (Rhoads, 1995). For example, Rankin (2003) surveyed over 1,000 LGB college students and found one out of three students experienced harassment related to their sexuality on campus. Risk of harassment is problematic because LGB college students who live in a hostile environment report more mental health concerns and less overall well-being. Similarly, Przedworski et al. (2015) surveyed 34,324 college students from 2007-2011 using the College Student Health Survey. The authors found LGB college students reported more overall mental health diagnoses, and experienced more stressful life events than their heterosexual peers.
Thus, LGB students face added challenges as they transition to college and make sense of their sexual identity.

As college students transition from adolescence to young adulthood, they begin the process of forming personal identities related to gender, race, sexuality, and spirituality (Stevens, 2004). Researchers and theorists have attempted to construct sexual identity development models to describe the experiences of LGB development.

Sexual Identity Development Models

Early researchers and mental practitioners believed homosexuality was abnormal and classified LGB individuals using an etiological and pathological perspective (Acosta, 1975; West, 1967). Alfred Kinsey emerged as one of the first researchers to identify homosexuality as a normal part of one’s sexuality (Kinsey, 1948). Kinsey (1948) purported that people do not fit into restricted categories and developed the Heterosexual-Homosexual Rating Scale (often referred to as “The Kinsey Scale”), arguing that individuals fall along a continuum based on their sexual thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

After the American Psychiatric Association (APA) declassified homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders II (DSM-II) in 1973 (Drescher, 2008), researchers began to focus their work on sexual identity development and the different aspects of homosexual functioning (Cass, 1984). Early identity models sought to describe the affective, cognitive, and behavioral changes experienced by LGB individuals as their identity shifted from heterosexual to homosexual. Three types of developmental models include stage models, lifespan models, and multidimensional models.
Cass (1979) was one of the first theorists to propose a model of homosexual identity formation. Cass purported that homosexuals navigate through six, non-age related, stages including: (1) identity awareness by which the individual first becomes aware of thoughts and feelings that might be characterized as homosexual; (2) identity comparison by which the individual experiences feelings of separation and estrangement from others because of their perceived differences; (3) identity tolerance by which the individual seeks contact with other homosexuals to fulfill needs; (4) identity acceptance by which the individual develops a more positive view of themselves through increased contact with other sexual minorities and through the disclosure of their identity to others; (5) identity pride by which the individual experiences contentment toward their identity and anger regarding the stigmatization of homosexuality; and (6) identity synthesis by which the individual integrates homosexuality as only one aspect of their identity. Although Cass (1979) asserted that individuals advance through the stages in a linear fashion, she also acknowledged that the stages are fluid as individuals could progress and regress throughout the stages of development as they make meaning of their identity.

Cass (1984) tested and validated her model by developing the Stage Allocation Measure, which required respondents to select one out of six descriptions that represented each of her model’s six stages, and the Homosexual Identity Questionnaire (HIQ), which contained 210 items that measured various dimensions of sexual identity. Cass (1984) administered both instruments to 227 individuals and received 178 (78.4%) responses. Cass concluded that her stage model was valid because the participant’s
responses on the Homosexual Identity Questionnaire predicted their response to the Stage Allocation Model.

Cass (1979) was one of the first theorists who believed individuals take an active role in developing positive sexual identities and authors often cite her model in literature pertaining to sexual identity. However, her model has several limitations. First, very few researchers have conducted empirical studies that support her model. Additionally, Cass’ model was normed with White gay men and generalized for all sexual minorities. Therefore, this model might not be as relevant for women, bisexual individuals, or LGB persons from other cultural backgrounds. Finally, Cass’ claim that identity pride precludes identity integration might not be as relevant today. For example, in today’s society passionate advocacy for gay rights might be done by individual who have an integrated identity. Given these limitations, other researchers developed stage models with variations from her process.

Coleman (1982) studied patterns of sexual orientation development and proposed a five-stage model based on observed patterns of behavior. Coleman believed that individuals had to complete tasks before they could integrate sexual identity and enter romantic relationships. Similar to Cass, Coleman believed individuals completed these tasks throughout various stages, and individuals must complete the tasks in each stage to integrate sexual identity. These stages included: (1) pre-coming out by which individuals are not consciously aware of having same-sex feelings but face the reality that they are different; (2) coming out by which individuals acknowledge same sex feelings for themselves and share these feelings with others; (3) exploration by which individuals experiment with sexual and social activity and develop a positive self-
image; (4) *first relationships* by which individuals seek stable and committed relationships beyond physical and sexual attraction within the context of a heteronormative society; and (5) *identity integration* by which individuals incorporate their public and private selves into one healthy self-image.

Unlike Cass’s model, Coleman’s model (1982) seemed more flexible as he argued that individuals do not necessarily progress through all of the stages in a linear fashion. Rather, he argued individuals address tasks in multiple stages simultaneously or become fixated on a single stage. However, Coleman did not validate his model, or support his theory with empirical evidence. Coleman also acknowledged that his model oversimplified the coming out process and cautioned readers from assuming his model fits reality. Nonetheless, authors commonly cite Coleman’s work throughout literature related to LGB identity.

A few years later, Troiden (1989) described a four-stage model of homosexual identity formation. Troiden disagreed with Cass and Coleman and purported that the stages of sexual identity formation were indeed age-specific. Troiden interviewed 150 gay White men in New York City, Suffolk County, and Minneapolis with the intention of understanding how one “chooses homosexuality” (p. 288) as a way of life. Based on patterns in his sample’s responses, Troiden described four stages of development in his theory. In the first stage, *sensitization*, Troiden theorized that boys under the age of thirteen perceive they are somehow different from their peers. Then, between the ages of 13-17, they begin to recognize that their differences relate to sexuality. Troiden (1989) labeled the second stage *dissociation and signification* and suggested young men at the age of 17 consider the potential they might be gay by separating same-sex
attraction from their overall identity and rationalizing their same-sex attractions as “something else” like curiosity or a phase. In the third stage, coming out, Troiden explained that gay men begin to alter their view of homosexuality by associating their sexual behavior with a part of their identity. However, Troiden (1989) also found that many individuals in his sample defined coming out differently because the process involves admitting to oneself they are homosexual, practicing homosexual activity, seeking out same-sex partners, and deciding to share their identity with others (Troiden, 1989). Troiden purported most homosexuals fully identify themselves as gay by the age of 21.3. In the final stage, commitment, Troiden contended that homosexuals fully accept being gay as a way of life by integrating sexual attraction and feelings related to same-sex partners. Furthermore, Troiden argued that men who solely have sex with men without the desire to enter a romantic relationship are exhibiting homosexual tendencies, whereas men who enter a romantic and committed relationship with a same-sex partner have fully formed a gay identity.

Troiden (1989) found that gay men in his sample entered their first relationship at a mean age of 23.9, approximately 2.5 years after the coming out stage. Troiden concluded that progressing through each of the stages is not inevitable for all gay men, but more so an indicator that one will acquire a gay identity. Troiden’s view differed from Cass and Coleman because he assumed that “becoming homosexual” (p. 288) is a choice and many men who engage in sex with other men could potentially decide to never adapt a gay identity. Troiden also viewed the act of entering a relationship and disclosing their sexuality to others as an indication that a man has accepted a gay identity, whereas Cass and Coleman focused more on one’s internal process. Similar
to the other stage models, Troiden’s (1989) work is commonly cited in the literature, but
not validated in samples beyond his original study.

The three stage models discussed seem to share a general process whereby
sexual minorities become aware of same gender attraction, explore ways to make
meaning of that sexual attraction, form relationships with others, and adapt to a new
way of life by understanding how sexuality influences their identity. Although these
models share similarities, other researchers have argued that sexual orientation identity
development is too complex of a process to be described by sequential steps (Horowitz
& Newcomb, 2001). The three stage models discussed were normed with mostly White
gay men and may not be applicable with lesbian women or bisexual individuals
(Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Cross (1991) criticized minority development models as being
one-dimensional, and argued that the personal and interpersonal processes of identity
development were separate and independent processes. Furthermore, Boxer (1989)
questioned the overall validity of stage models based on the fact they were formulated
using memories of past recollections rather than current experiences. As an alternative,
Boxer (1989) called for a “longitudinal life-span investigation” (p. 342) by which
researchers would study LGB youth at different points throughout their lives. Although
researchers have not yet conducted a longitudinal study, D’Augelli (1994) developed a
sexual identity model that acknowledged the complexity of identity with regard to one’s
experience and social context.

Lifespan Model of Sexual Identity

D’Augelli (1994) developed a lifespan model that viewed sexual orientation
development as an unfolding, or “becoming,” (p. 313) process, associated with one’s
self-concept and relationship to society. Unlike stage models that emphasize one’s internal process; D’Augelli (1994) emphasized the influence of cultural context on the process of development. D’Augelli argued that sexuality is influenced by three inter-related contexts: (1) subjectivities and actions that describe how individuals perceive and engage with sexuality to construct identity; (2) interactive intimacies that describe how early family and peer interactions influence intimate partnerships; and (3) sociohistorical connections that describe cultural and social expectations, customs, and norms.

D’Augelli purported that the three contexts directly influence six processes that unfold during the course of an LGB person’s lifetime. The processes include: (1) exiting heterosexual identity by which an individual understands their sexual orientation, shares their sexual identity with others, and separates themselves away from their previous heterosexual identity; (2) developing a personal LGB identity status by which an individual learns how to be LGB in relationship to other LGB persons while dispelling socially constructed myths pertaining to sexual minorities; (3) developing a lesbian-gay-bisexual social identity by which an individual creates a social support network affirming of their sexual identity; (4) becoming a lesbian-gay-bisexual offspring by which an individual renegotiates family roles after coming out to their family of origin; (5) developing a lesbian-gay-bisexual intimacy status by which an individual reconfigures their understanding of social structures related to relationships and develop romantic relationships; and (6) entering a lesbian-gay-bisexual community by which an individual confronts societal barriers and becomes engaged in public, social, and political action.
In contrast to stage models, D'Augelli (1994) argued that an individual addresses the six identity processes independently of each other at different points throughout their lives.

D'Augelli’s (1994) focused his model on cultural contexts, making his theory adaptable to time and place. For example, an individual who identifies as LGB today would likely experience more societal acceptance than an individual who came out in the 1970s. Furthermore, D'Augelli acknowledged that the experiences of lesbian women and bisexual persons could differ from the experiences of gay men. For example, D'Augelli (1994) argued that coming out as lesbian is far more psychologically manageable than coming out as a gay man.

Although D’Augelli’s (1994) considered environmental contexts and attended to differences among sexual identities, his theory was still limited. Similar to the stage models, the lifespan model focused solely on sexual identity and did not describe experiences of LGB persons from other marginalized groups related to race, gender, and spirituality (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). D’Augelli’s argument seemed based in theory rather than research because he did not describe the methods by which he came to his conclusions. Other authors sought to explain sexual identity while accounting for these factors.

Multidimensional Identity Models

McCarn and Fassinger (1996) developed a lesbian identity model incorporating aspects of previous LGB identity models as well as racial/ethnic and gender identity models. They proposed that lesbian women navigate through four phases: (1) awareness, (2) exploration, (3) deepening/commitment, and (4) internalization/synthesis. McCarn and Fassinger argued the four phases occur within
two separate processes: (1) sexual identity development and (2) group membership identity development. Throughout the sexual identity process, lesbian women notice they feel different (awareness), develop strong sexual feelings for other women (exploration), increase their self-awareness related to sexuality (deepening/commitment), and fully transform their self-concept (internalization/synthesis). Simultaneously, throughout the group membership identity process, lesbian women learn that heterosexuality is not a universal status (awareness), seek out more knowledge and reconsider their own attitudes related to the LGB community (exploration), create relationships with others by learning of the LGB community’s unique features related to connectedness and oppression (deepening/commitment), and integrate LGB membership as a part of her identity (internalization/synthesis). McCarn and Fassinger (1996) emphasized that although the individual and group processes could influence each other, they are independent and do not coincide with each other. Unlike the stage models and D’Augelli’s lifespan model, McCarn and Fassinger (1996) highlighted the importance of development within and outside of community membership in a cultural group. This model was also the first to focus on lesbian identity rather than gay men.

McCarn and Fassinger (1996) summarized the process by which McCarn validated this model within her unpublished master’s thesis project. Using a Q-sort methodology with 38 lesbian women, McCarn hypothesized the manner by which participants would sort 48 statements related to their coming out process within the two processes and four phases of the lesbian identity formation model. The researchers predicted both the process and the phase for 81% of the items represented in the
model. Fassinger and Miller (1996) replicated this study by modifying the Q-Sort and administering the study with 34 gay men. Similarly, participants distinguished between the processes and phases in approximately 84% of the cases. The authors concluded that their multidimensional model was applicable for both lesbians and gay men. However, they admitted the model did not account for the diverse experiences of different demographics (Fassinger & Miller, 1996).

Hoping to address sexual identity more holistically, Mohr and Fassinger (2000) argued that sexual identity develops across three dimensions of experience including intrapersonal variables, interpersonal variables, and variables related to specific events. They also hoped to quantify the development process and created the Lesbian and Gay Identity Scale (LGIS) as a means to measure one’s sexual identity development. Mohr and Kendra (2011) revised the LGIS scales and included six dimensions of sexual identity development in their inventory. The six subscales of the LGIS included: *internalized homonegativity* whereby one rejects an LGB identity, *concealment motivation* whereby one protects their privacy as an LGB person; *acceptance concerns* whereby one is concerned about stigmatization related to being an LGB person; *identity uncertainty* whereby one is uncertain of their sexual orientation identity; *identity superiority* whereby one favors LGB people over heterosexual people; and *finding the experience of developing an LGB identity to be a difficult process* (Mohr & Kendra, 2011). Since then, the LGIS was utilized in other research studies to assess one’s sexual identity development (Cramer, Burks, Golom, Stroud, & Graham, 2016; Murchison, Boyd, & Pachankis, 2016). However, the authors cautioned readers that the
study did not use a random sample and was normed using White, college-educated participants.

Horowitz and Newcomb (2001) also developed an identity model that honored the multidimensional aspects of identity and moved beyond the stages, trends and labels infused within the previous models. Instead, they viewed desire, behavior, and identity as separate paradigms related to individual development and the individual’s relationship to their environment. Thus, rather than focus on how a person identifies, it is more helpful to focus on the meaning that comes from understanding desire, behavior, and identity (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2001). For example, a man might have sex with another man, but never identify as a gay man because his sexual behavior is independent from his sexual identity. Furthermore, Horowitz and Newcomb (2001) believed that under a social constructivist lens, sexual orientation identity development is a fluid, ever-changing, and life-long process that unfolds over time with no true endpoint. They also acknowledged the lack of specific models related to bisexuality and argued their model allows for flexibility in sexual identity.

Overall, the evolution of sexual identity models illustrates how societal views related to LGB persons have changed over time. The current discussion of models is not exhaustive as other researchers have conceptualized sexual identity development with other unique frameworks including creating typologies of gay men (Dilley, 2005), examining the role of attachment styles in sexual identity formation (Elizur & Mintzer, 2001), and identifying “milestone events” throughout an LGB person’s life (Floyd & Stein, 2002, p. 167). Although the ideas and constructs between the different theories are diverse, most of the models postulated that there is a period of exploration as one’s
develops their sexual identity (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; D’Augelli, 1994; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Because individuals often explore identity after leaving home to attend college, several authors have specifically examined sexual identity development within the context of the college environment.

Sexual Identity Development in College

Often, sexual minorities navigate through a process of sexual identity development during adolescence or early adulthood after a person leaves home to attend college (Rhoads, 1997). A detailed literature review populated very little research that specifically connects established sexual identity models (e.g., Cass, 1979; D’Augelli, 1994) to the college student population. In one article, Zubernis, Snyder, and McCoy (2011) summarized Cass’ identity model and suggested possible counseling interventions that college counselors might use based on the client’s stage of development. Although applicable to college students, their recommendations were theoretical and not empirically supported.

Other researchers have examined the sexual identity development process specifically with college students. Meyer and Schwitzer (1999) administered a semi-structured written survey to 165 LGB college students from seven universities to assess milestones throughout the coming out experience. Using a constant comparative methodology, they verified patterns from a previous study (Meyer 1998) and developed a six-stage model that described the identity development process of sexual minority college students. The six stages included recognizing a difference whereby the students noticed differences between themselves and their peers; reflective observing whereby the students perceived characteristics of other sexual minorities and various
attitudes about sexual minorities from others; internalized reflective observations whereby the students began to identify specific behaviors and attitudes related to sexuality that were congruent with their internal beliefs; self-identifying whereby the students transitioned from identifying characteristics within others to specifically identifying as LGB; coming into proximity whereby the students actively sought interpersonal relationships with other LGB peers; and networking and connecting whereby the students further immersed themselves into different social and political groups related to their sexual orientation community. Meyer and Schwitzer (1999) also reported the mode ages that participants entered each stage and found the majority of participants entered the coming into proximity stage at the age of 18, or when they began to attend college. Similar to other stage models, the participants seemed to shift from feeling anxious in the early stages of their process to internalizing their experience in the middle stages and ending their process by integrating their identity through forming relationships. Meyer and Schwitzer’s model was strong because the sample was diverse in terms of gender, sexuality, and race. However, the model did not incorporate or assess the relevance of disclosing one’s sexual identity to others and was not validated in other studies.

In another study, Stevens (2004) conducted a grounded theory analysis to explore how the college environment contributed to sexual identity development. He interviewed 11 self-identified gay male college students about the critical incidents related to their coming out process on campus and coded the results using a comparative analysis approach. Stevens identified finding empowerment as the central category of the model whereby his sample relied on their internal feelings as they
moved from self-acceptance toward identity integration. Stevens (2004) included five other themes in his theory including self-acceptance, disclosure to others, individual factors of supports and liabilities, environmental factors, and integrating multiple identities. His findings supported earlier models that conceptualized sexual development as not linear (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2001), related to the environment (D’Augelli, 1994), and intersecting across other multiple identities (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000). Furthermore, for most of the men in his study, the college environment provided a safe context whereby they could explore ways they could disclose their sexual orientation to others and learn how to make meaning of identifying as gay (Stevens, 2004). However, Steven’s sample only included men from one university, limiting the applicability of his findings to diverse populations and other geographical locations. Furthermore, Steven’s work was not tested or validated in future studies.

Vaccaro and Newman (2016) examined how sexual minority college students make meaning out of their college experience as they transition from living at home with their parents to living independently at college. Vaccaro and Newman (2016) conducted a grounded theory to examine how LGBPQ students found, developed, and made meaning of their sense of belonging throughout their first year of college. The authors conducted two semi-structured interviews with eight participants throughout an academic year and determined that belonging was fostered when individuals felt safe and accepted by the university as a whole, within student groups, and in intimate friendships. Vaccaro and Newman also hypothesized that affirming LGBT messages from the university, meaningful group membership, and authentic friendships with other sexual minorities all contribute to one’s sense of belonging which changes as one’s
sexual identity evolves. Overall, their findings provided further evidence that colleges and universities provide a space for sexual minorities to find a sense of belonging related to their sexual identity. However, Vaccaro and Newman did not take into account how sexual minority college students navigate the process of disclosing their identity to individuals outside of the campus community.

Although some literature was published to explore and identify the experiences of LGB students in the context of the college environment, Sanlo (2004) argued that research pertaining to the experiences of LGB college students is invisible and advocated for more in-depth studies examining the resiliency and positive coping strategies of LGB college students. Given the freedoms inherent with college, students often begin to feel more comfortable initiating their coming out process in college (Rhoads, 1994). Therefore, more research is warranted on the coming out process of college students.

Coming Out

Coming out is often considered to be the act of telling someone else that one identifies as LGB. However, just as sexual identity development is complex, coming out to others is a multifaceted process in itself whereby one chooses to come out, experiences coming out internally and externally, and manages the consequences after coming out.

Definition of “Coming Out”

Guittar (2013) purported many researchers make assumptions that individuals share one common meaning of “coming out” and fail to capture the diverse lived experiences of how LGB individuals define the concept of “coming out.” Using a
grounded theory approach, Guittar conducted 30 open-ended interviews with individuals who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer to explore the meaning of coming out. Although all respondents agreed that the coming out process was “transformational” (p. 183), the nature of this experience varied from self-affirmation to sharing their identity with others. Overall, the participants’ responses were unique and based on their own worldviews. Guittar (2013) concluded that although coming out indeed has different meanings for different people, it remains relevant to identity development today.

Much of the literature related to the concept of “coming out” defines the phenomenon as the process whereby an LGB individual discloses their sexual orientation to others (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Waldner & Magruder, 1999). Conversely, other writers described coming out as an ongoing and lifelong process whereby LGB individuals decide whether to disclose their sexual orientation every time they meet someone new (Appleby, 2001; Morris, 1997). Additionally, Mohr and Fassinger (2003) linked the construct of self-acceptance as an LGB individual to the coming out process, explaining that sexual minorities also come out to oneself. Rust (2003) described coming out as “the process by which individuals come to recognize that they have romantic or sexual feelings toward members of their own gender, adopt lesbian or gay (or bisexual) identities, and then share these identities with others” (p. 227). Rust’s definition seems to be the most comprehensive because he incorporated elements from a variety of definitions (Appleby, 2001; Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Mohr & Fassinger, 2003) and conceptualized coming out as a process rather than a single event.
Although Rust’s definition encompassed both the intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects of coming out, he did not take into account the importance of social context described in the multidimensional identity models (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2001; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Similar to Guittar (2013), Orne (2011) contented researchers are inconsistent in how they define coming out, and acknowledged the importance of social context by re-terming the phenomenon as “strategic outness” (p. 682). Under this framework, LGB persons negotiate how and when to disclose their sexual identity to others based on social contexts. Orne (2011) collected thirteen anonymous open-ended essays from gay men who were members of queer social organizations in Texas. Orne (2011) analyzed the content of the essays and identified common themes across the narratives. Orne (2011) found that each of the participants described multiple strategies in how they shared their sexuality, various motivations for controlling who knows about their sexuality, and the importance of social context in their decision-making to disclose. He concluded that coming out is not only related to identity formation, but also identity management whereby LGB individuals simultaneously live inside and outside of the closet and consider social context when making decisions about coming out to new people.

Based on the definitions by Orne (2011) and Rust (2003), coming out can be described as a process whereby an individual recognizes they are attracted to the same gender, assumes an LGB identity, discloses their LGB identity to others, and manages their LGB identity based on social context. Although making the decision to disclose LGB identity is only one part of this process, for many LGB individuals it is one of the one of most challenging aspects of coming out.
Choosing to Disclose

For LGB individuals, deciding whether to disclose one’s sexual identity to others is an important decision and milestone event in one’s identity development process (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008). Many individuals choose to disclose their sexual orientation to others with the hopes they will establish closer bonds with friends and family by living their lives more authentically (Ben-Ari, 1995a). However, the irreversible nature of these disclosures, the fear of rejection, and other potential negative consequences prevents many individuals from coming out to others (Ben-Ari, 1995b). Most individuals do not view coming out as an all-or-nothing phenomenon but rather choose to come out at different times in different environments (Orne, 2011). Researchers have examined various factors that influence the timing of their decision to share their sexual identity with others including age, location, gender, race, perceived risks, and beliefs about the world.

Schope (2002) sought to understand age and location factors and surveyed 443 gay men in various gay-related organizations throughout the Midwest. He concluded that gay men who were living in urban areas were more likely to be open in all settings. Furthermore, Schope (2002) discovered that older gay men reported being more secretive about their sexuality whereas younger gay men reported being out in more settings. Schope (2002) explained this finding by postulating older gay men have longstanding internalized stigmas and fears associated with identifying as gay, whereas the younger generation experienced dramatic shifts in how society affirms sexual minorities.
Grov, Bimbi, Nanin, and Parsons (2006) criticized previous coming out studies, claiming they did not use culturally diverse samples. To address this concern, they administered the “Sex and Love Survey, Version 2.0” to 2,733 participants at LBG community events in Los Angeles and New York. After analyzing their responses, they concluded that men often come out at an earlier age ($M = 17.5$) than women ($M = 19.6$) and that younger LGB men and women came out at earlier ages than older LGB men and women, a finding that supports previous research (Schope, 2002). Finally, among LGB people of color, sexual minorities self-identified as LGB at approximately the same ages as White individuals, but were less likely to be out to their parents (Grov et al., 2006). Although Grov et al. (2006) sought to sample a diverse population by recruiting participants at community events, they neglected to sample participants who do not have access to the events and individuals who live in rural areas.

Beyond demographics, authors have examined how perceived risks influence one’s coming process. Evans and Broido (1999) interviewed 20 LGB college students about their experiences coming out on college campuses. They found that individuals chose to make disclosures based on their perceived level of risk related to how others would react to their disclosure. For example, if the LGB person believed their disclosure would be met with rejection, discrimination, or violence, then the individual was less likely to come out to that specific individual or within that specific context. Furthermore, Evans and Broido (1999) argued that decisions related to coming out were not necessarily dependent on one’s level of identity development, but moreso one’s beliefs about their environment.
In a related study, Bogaert and Hafter (2009) surveyed 369 gay and bisexual men and examined how a person’s “belief in a just world” (BJW) influenced the age they chose to come out. The researchers discovered the average age that the men in their sample decided to come out was 26.3. However, they concluded that men who expressed a higher BJW acknowledged their sexual identity at a younger age than those who expressed a lower BJW. This finding supports Evans and Broido's (1999) idea that LGB individuals who perceive the environment as safe will also perceive less threats of victimization and therefore be more comfortable living open and authentic lives (Bogaert & Hafter, 2009).

Previous researchers established a number of factors that influenced the timing of one’s decision to come out, including age, gender, ethnicity, physical location, perceived level of safety, and personal beliefs about the world. Although Evans and Broido (1999) suggested coming out was not dependent upon one’s level of identity development, there seems to be overlapping variables between factors that influence the decision to come out and overall identity development. Therefore, it seems appropriate to consider the relationship between coming out the sexual identity development.

Implications of Coming Out

Authors have disagreed about the relationship between LGB identity development and outness. Stage theorists described outness as being a necessary factor of a more developed LGB identity (Cass, 1979). However, other authors argued that contextual factors (Orne, 2011), perceived risks (Evans & Broido, 1999), and environmental factors (Jordan & Deluty, 1998) were influential in determining one’s
outness. Halpin and Allen (2004) provided evidence that stronger sexual identity is associated with better mental health. They examined the relationship between sexual identity and psychosocial well-being by administering a battery of instruments, including the GIS, to 425 gay males. Halpin and Allen (2004) found significant positive correlations between well-being and the early stages of Cass’s (1979) homosexual identity formation process, and significant negative correlations between well-being and the middle stages of identity formation. However, after individuals repaired relationships and integrated LGB sexuality into their overall identity, the correlations between their stage of identity and overall happiness, satisfaction with life, and self-esteem increased while their overall sense of loneliness decreased (Halpin & Allen, 2004). They explained this difference by proposing individuals disclose their identity to others during the middle stages of the coming out process and thus experience more rejection and less well-being.

In another study, Feldman and Wright (2013) sought to understand the relationships among LGB identity, outness, and mental health. They administered the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Identity Scale (LGBIS), Gay Identity Questionnaire (GIQ), Outness Inventory (OI), Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI), and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) to 192 participants who identified as LGB. Feldman and Wright (2013) conducted a regression analysis and found that outness level significantly predicted negative attitudes regarding sexual minority identity. However, once the authors included the GIQ identity stage in the regression, they found that identity was a mediator for outness and mental health. Thus, participants who indicated a higher degree of outness and a stronger sense of identity reported better
mental health whereas those with high degrees of outness with a limited sense of identity reported poorer mental health (Feldman & Wright, 2013. The authors concluded the indirect effect of identity as a mediator was statistically significant \( \theta = 0.19, p < .001 \). Thus, one can conclude that identity formation and outness are two separate, but interrelated constructs whereby a stronger LGB identity encourages one to come out and a higher outness level strengthens one’s sexual identity development (Feldman & Wright, 2013).

Once an individual decides to disclose, there may be contextual considerations as well. Legate, Ryan, and Weinstein (2012) sought to understand the differences in how LGB individuals disclose their sexual orientation in various social and environmental contexts. Using a self-determination theory (STD) framework, the authors examined the relationships between the level of perceived support for autonomy, outness, and psychological well-being. The researchers surveyed 161 LGB participants and concluded individuals were more likely to disclose their sexual orientation in contexts that they perceived as being supportive of autonomy. Thus, one possible implication from this study might be that individuals who perceive their environment as being controlling might also perceive a barrier in disclosing their sexual identity within that specific context (Legate et al., 2012).

In a follow up study, Ryan, Legate, and Weinstein (2015) surveyed 108 LGB individuals about their initial coming out disclosures to their father, mother, best friend, and the first person they told. The authors created a measure to assess the participant’s perceptions of reactions to their disclosures and included questions from the Basic Psychological Need Scale, CES-D, and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. Hierarchal
regression analyses revealed that negative responses to coming out disclosures predicted higher levels of depression and lower levels of self-esteem in all four of the relationships. Additionally, individuals who perceived negative responses to their disclosures reported feeling disconnected from that person, as they believed they were unable to express their authentic selves (Ryan et al., 2015). The authors estimated that that 16% of the variance was explained by how the parents responded. The importance of self-expression supports Legate et al.’s (2012) earlier argument that autonomy-supported contexts increases one’s comfort level in coming out to others. In other words, how one perceives the coming out disclosure as encouraging or limiting one’s sense of autonomy influences the impact the reaction has on one’s overall well-being. The authors also encouraged researchers to continue to investigate the nature of various coming out experiences (Ryan et al, 2015).

Experiences of Coming Out

Manning (2015) explored different types of coming out disclosures and argued that the current body of research related to the coming out process is flawed because studies tend to examine the coming out process within the context of one disclosure while failing to take into consideration individuals disclose their identity to multiple people in a variety of different contexts. Manning surveyed 130 LGB adults and requested each participant write one positive narrative and one negative narrative related to their coming out experience. The researchers collected, coded, and analyzed 258 stories to create a typology of different coming out conversations. Manning’s team identified seven categories of coming out disclosures including: pre-planned whereby an LGB person decides to come out to someone and prepares for the interaction;
emergent whereby an LGB person sees an opportunity to present their sexual orientation within a conversation, co-axed whereby an LGB person is supported and encouraged by someone else to share their sexual orientation; confrontational whereby someone demands an LGB person reveal their sexual identity; romantic whereby an LGB person comes out through romantic or sexual advances; educational/activist whereby an LGB person comes out to an audience as means of encouraging others; and mediated whereby LGB persons use other channels of communication to come out such as letters or the internet. Based on his typology, Manning theorized that the manner of which a coming out conversation occurs could influence future relational factors between the LGB individual and the person to whom they disclosed their identity. For example, individuals who came out with a pre-planned conversation described more positive feelings in comparison to those who were confronted about their sexuality. Manning also called for future research regarding how individuals might purposely construct coming out conversations to enhance support and acceptance. Although Manning acknowledged that each coming out disclosure is different, he did not include a discussion regarding how coming out is a process that goes beyond one single disclosure.

In another study, Perrin-Wallqvist and Lindblom (2015) conducted an interpretative phenomenological analysis to learn about the experiences of adolescents before, during, and after coming out disclosures to their parents. The researchers interviewed six LGB adolescents and identified four major themes throughout their narratives. First, the respondents reported that they felt alienated from others due to the hetero-normative nature of the world. Second, the participants also reported that they
felt insecure and anxious prior to sharing their sexual identity with others. Third, the interviewees believed that self-acceptance, and "being sure" (p. 474) they were gay were an important factor before coming out to others. Finally, the participants reported feeling whole after coming out, stating they felt relieved they could now live a more complete and authentic life (Perrin-Wallqvist & Lindblom, 2015). Although the respondents felt more authentic after the disclosure, the participants each acknowledged how nervous they felt prior to sharing their sexuality with their parents. The overall significance of these disclosures supports D’Augelli’s (1998) argument that one of the most challenging and noteworthy coming out experiences is the disclosure an LGB person makes about their sexual identity to their parents.

Coming Out to Parents

In the following section, a detailed discussion describes the process by which LGB youth and young adults come out to their parents. Attention is given to the process by which one comes out to their parents, the parent’s experience in hearing coming out disclosures, factors that influence their reactions, and the associations between rejecting or supportive responses with the overall well-being of LGB individuals.

The Process of Coming Out to Parents

Historically, authors argued one of the most difficult aspects of the coming out process is deciding when and how to reveal a non-traditional sexual identity to parents (Savin-Williams, 1989). Before deciding to disclose to their parents, LGB individuals reported fears of rejection, strained relationships, financial cut-off, and potential abuse (D’Augelli, 1998). Then, following a disclosure, parents often applied their negative views about homosexuality to their child, believing they failed them as a parent
(Strommen, 1989). Furthermore, relationships between LGB youth and their parents were altered as parents transitioned to a new understanding of their children and are forced to “come out” themselves as a parent of an LGB child (Boxer, Cook, & Herdt, 1991). Thus, many individuals waited until early adulthood rather than adolescence to come out to their parents (Boxer, Cook, & Herdt, 1991).

Although some might argue that individuals are coming out earlier due to a greater sense of societal acceptance (Harper, Brodsky, & Bruce, 2012), research continues to support the fact that LGB youth and young adults struggle as they come out to their parents. In one study, D’Augelli, Hershberger, and Pilkington (1998) surveyed 105 LGB youth using the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory (RSEI), and a questionnaire that encompassed various features of sexual identity including coming out milestones and experiences with harassment. Participants categorized how family members responded to a coming out disclosure into one of four categories (accepting, tolerant, intolerant, and rejecting). All participants lived with their parents during the time of the study and were members of a local LBG support group. Of the sample, 76% of participants had come out to their parents at the time of the study. However, most participants (77%) chose to come out to a friend first whereas only 9% of the respondents indicated that their first disclosure was to their parent. Of the participants who had come out to their parents, 51% of mothers and 27% of fathers were accepting. Furthermore, 51% of the participants who indicated they had disclosed their identity to their parents also shared they had attempted suicide in the past whereas only 12% of those who have not disclosed their sexual identity to their parents indicated previous suicide attempts. The authors concluded that coming out to
parents might not always be in the best interests for LGB youth living with their parents if the disclosure will put their emotional and physical safety at risk (D’Augelli et al., 1998). However, Henderson (1998) criticized the study and argued the authors did not describe the criteria used to evaluate the different levels of support and acceptance.

In more recent research, Rossi (2010) interviewed 53 LGB young adults about their experiences coming out to their parents. In the sample, 66% of participants told a friend about their sexual identity before coming out to their parents. However, when disclosing to parents, 100% of the participants told their mothers whereas 77% of the participants told both their mother and father. Of the participants who had disclosed to both parents, participants disclosed to their mothers first 96% of the time. Finally, 89% of participants told their mothers in a direct face-to-face manner and 58% of participants told their father in an indirect manner, such as a letter or via their mother (Rossi, 2010). These results support the findings from earlier studies (D’Augelli et al., 1998; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003) that purported LGB young adults are more likely to come out to their mothers before their fathers. This choice is likely caused by the perception of being closer to their mothers than their fathers and that the disclosure would better received by their mothers (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). Additionally, both studies agreed that parents were not the first disclosure, indicating the significance of the interaction in the LGB person’s life. Although this study provided insight into the degree that LGB individuals come out to their parents, the authors did not provide much discussion related to the actual experiences of LGB persons coming out their parents because the data was quantitative.
Potoczniak, Crosbie-Burnett, and Saltzburg (2009) conducted a qualitative study in which they led several focus groups with a diverse group of LGBTQ adolescents at four high schools throughout South Florida. The authors did not disclose the total number of participants involved in the study; however, between the four groups the sample consisted of 53% Hispanic/Latino/Latina, 35% Black/African American, 11% Caucasian/White, and 1% South Asian. All participants were between the ages of 14-18. After conducting the group interviews, the research team analyzed the data from the interviews using a phenomenological approach. Overall, the disclosure rates across the four groups varied from 30%-70% (Potoczniak et al., 2009). The researchers also identified five major themes within their analysis. First, most of the adolescents shared they were fearful of damaging the relationship with their parents. However, many shared that extended family members provided more support than immediate family members. Second, most of the African American participants across the four groups shared their parents initially reacted with shock or anger whereby many were kicked out of their home. However, most of these individuals also reported the tension between themselves and their parents was temporary and they were eventually welcomed back into their home. Third, the group members described the importance of social support from friends and extended family members, and the pain associated by the lack of support. Fourth, respondents felt that stronger religious beliefs would predict negative reactions from their parents. Last, of the students who thought their parents would react negatively, most agreed that they believed their parents would refuse to attend counseling to repair their relationship.
Overall, researchers exploring coming out to parents provide evidence for two important conclusions. First, many LGB youth and young adults experience mental health concerns due to the fear of parental rejection or the actual rejection itself. Second, social support can be helpful for LGB youth who are coming out of the closet. In order to further understand this process, it is important to consider studies related to the parent’s perspective after learning a son or daughter identifies as LGB.

Becoming the Parent of an LGB Child

There have been conflicting views regarding the experiences of parents who learn they have a child who identifies as lesbian, gay or bisexual. Some theorized that parents navigate their own coming out process (Boxer, Cook, & Herdt, 1991; D’Augelli, 1994) whereas others argued that parents experience stages of grief (Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998). Various studies have supported or negated the two different theories.

Boxer, Cook, and Herdt (1991) sought to understand how parents react to the disclosure that their child is gay and how the disclosure affected the relationship between the parent and their child. The researchers interviewed 50 parents from a Chicago-based parent support group. The authors found that most parents revealed a process of “reciprocal socialization” (p. 86) whereby their children taught them cultural knowledge related to gay and lesbian life. Furthermore, the authors argued that parents experience a “coming out” process of their own whereby parents restructure their hopes for the future of their children (Boxer et al., 1991). Thus, the authors concluded the process by which a parent identifies as the parent of LGB son or daughter is comparable to the different models of sexual identity development.
Savin-Williams and Dube (1998) disagreed with Boxer, Cook, and Herdt (1991) and conceptualized the parent’s process differently. They developed a theoretical model that compared the process by which parents understand their child’s LGB identity with the stages of grief (Kubler-Ross, 1969). The authors explained that although parents eventually come to terms with their child’s sexual orientation, the process by which they reach that point is fluid and uncertain. Similar to grief, Savin-Williams and Dube (1998) asserted that parents initially react with feelings of shock after learning about their child’s identity. Then, after time passes, parents enter the denial phase as they experience apprehension about the disclosure and do not know how to respond. Some parents believe that their child is going through a phase and others choose to ignore their feelings completely, becoming isolated from others. Eventually, parents begin to feel angry and might direct that anger toward the child directly or to an external entity they can blame for their child’s sexuality. Parents might also attempt to use bargaining strategies, such as making deals with God or asking the child to keep their sexuality a secret, as a means of finding control. Furthermore, parents could also experience feelings of depression as they work through feelings of shame and guilt. Finally, as parents begin to acknowledge the idea that their child will not be heterosexual, they enter the acceptance phase whereby they feel more comfortable discussing their son or daughter’s sexual orientation with others (Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998). Although many of the themes within these stages echo the experiences of some parents with LGB children, these stages might not fit for all parents. Furthermore, although this model is theoretical in nature and has not been tested or validated, it is still cited throughout the literature.
Kircher and Ahlijah (2011) investigated the coming out experiences of parents and interviewed twelve parents of LGBT children. After identifying common themes in the data, the authors found parents also experience a parallel coming out process as they decided whether to tell other family members and friends that they have a child that identifies as LGBT. In addition, the authors recognized parents had to learn how to navigate fears of stigma and discrimination against themselves and their children. These findings support Boxer, Cook, and Herdt's (1991) conceptualization that compared the parent’s own experience with their child’s coming out process. However, these authors were unclear about their research methodology and did not connect their findings to previous theory or literature.

Saltzburg (2004) conducted a phenomenological analysis to understand the meaning parents make after learning a son or daughter identifies as LGB. Saltzburg (2004) interviewed seven parents about their experiences with their children before, during, and after the coming out disclosure. The length of time since their child’s coming out disclosure was between five months to two years. The participants revealed five themes: awareness their child was different, knowing with certainty after coming out, emotional detachment, fears of estrangement, and adjustment and education. All of the parents spoke of experiencing deep sadness related to the loss of the life they had hoped for their child along with the intense fear they would become distant from their child if they were unable to enter the “gay world” (p.114). The participants also shared their struggles with integrating negative views of homosexuality with their love for their child (Saltzburg, 2004). However, over time, all of the parents were able to integrate their new understanding of themselves as a part of an LGB son or daughter. This study
confirmed that parents indeed endure strong emotional responses as they adapt to a new understanding of their LGB child. Overall, Saltzburg’s (2004) findings seem to mirror elements of Savin-Williams and Dube’s grief process (1998). However, Saltzburg (2004) did not try to explain the process by which the parents came to understand their child’s identity within the context of a model.

Goodrich (2009) recognized the lack of theory in the literature regarding parental process in coming out. In response, he conducted a grounded theory investigation to examine the process by which parents of LGB children assume a new identity. He recruited thirteen parents from local LGBT organizations who identified as heterosexual with an LGB child, and who had “successfully integrated” (p. 37) their experience since learning of their child’s sexuality. The parents’ ages varied from 50 to 73 years old and the parent’s sons and daughters ranged from 20 to 41 years old. Goodrich (2009) purposefully did not define the term success, as he wanted to explore the meaning of that construct as a part of his study. Goodrich utilized Strauss & Corbin’s (1998) conditional/consequential matrix as he analyzed the interview responses and created an emergent theory. In contrast to earlier literature (Boxer et al., 1991; Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998), Goodrich (2009) found themes that indicate the parent’s integration process is complex and continuous rather than linear. Furthermore, he found themes that parents’ processes were influenced by preconceived notions about their children, the initial emotional reaction to their child’s coming out disclosure, the degree of secrecy in the family, levels of social support, and overall cognitive, behavioral, and emotional responses overtime. Furthermore, Goodrich (2009) purported that “success” (p. 54)
could not be determined by the parent themselves, but moreso how their LGB-identified child perceived their parent’s process.

Grafsky (2014) extended Goodrich’s (2009) work and conducted a grounded theory investigation that infused symbolic interaction theory and incorporated a family systems perspective. Grafsky’s (2014) interviewed eight parents of LGB youth ages 14-21. Her findings supported earlier research that the initial coming out disclosure was a highly stressful and emotional event for both parents and their LGB children (Goodrich, 2009). Grafsky (2014) also purported how disclosure changed family roles and forced parents to create new identities for themselves. Grafsky’s theory supported D’Augelli’s (1994) theory of sexual development as parents learned a new way of being as they did not reconstruct their identities immediately after hearing the disclosure, but rather through a process of “becoming” the parent of an LGB child (Grafsky, 2014).

The research on parents’ experiences during and after the coming out process provided evidence that parents of LGB children withstand a difficult and emotional process whereby they adjust to a new view of their child, redefine themselves as a parent, and negotiate new family roles. Given these changes, it is not surprising that a parent’s responses to a coming out disclosure are varied and unpredictable (Cramer & Muzzonigro, 1993). Therefore, one must understand the factors that influence the different types of parental responses and how families readjust following a disclosure.

Factors Influencing Parental Responses and Family Adjustment

Research suggests different factors, including family values, cohesion between family members, and cognitive flexibility, influence parental responses to coming out disclosures. Several researchers examined how these dynamics influence parental
responses and family functioning following a coming out disclosure of an LGB family member.

Newman and Muzzonigro (1993) examined the influence of family values on gay youth’s coming out process. They recruited 27 gay males between the ages of 17-20 from local colleges, youth groups, and gay nightclubs and asked the participants to complete a survey with questions pertaining to their demographic information, coming out process, and family values. Newman and Muzzonigro (1993) measured the coming out process by asking the participants questions related to the stage models of sexual identity development (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989) and categorizing the respondents into one of three stages: sensitization, awareness with confusion, denial, guilt, or shame, and acceptance. They also operationalized “traditional family values” (p. 213) based on how the respondents rated their family’s focus on religion, emphasis on traditional marriage and having children, and whether a non-English language was spoken in the home. The results showed that families with more traditional values were less accepting of the gay person’s coming out disclosure. Additionally, the gay youth from traditional families found the process of accepting a gay identity more difficult than youth from non-traditional families. Based on these results, Newman and Muzzonigro (1993) suggested that gay adolescents require support systems to integrate their sexual identity as they come out to their families. However, the authors did not explain what support entails or address how traditional values influenced mental health.

In a related study, Willoughby, Malik, and Lindahl (2006) sought to understand how family cohesion prior to coming out disclosures influenced parental reactions. The researchers recruited 72 gay men from local LGBT community groups and administered
the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales (FACES III), the Authoritative Parenting Measure, and the Perceived Parental Reactions Scale (PPRS) to all participants. Willoughby (2006) specifically developed the PPRS for this study to measure the degree of perceived parental rejection resulting from sexual orientation disclosures. The results indicated men from cohesive and adaptable families perceived less negative parental reactions related to their coming disclosures in comparison to men from disconnected and rigid families. The authors concluded families who have the emotional and social resources to handle life stressors are able to adjust to the changes in family dynamics after a member of the family discloses they are LGB (Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006). This study was also significant as the researchers created assessment instruments that would be used in future research studies.

Goodrich and Gilbride (2010) further investigated the relationship between family resources and adjustment as they sought to validate and refine Goodrich’s emergent theory (2009). The researchers sampled 440 heterosexual parents with LGB sons or daughters from support organizations, religious organizations, and organizations that actively dis-identify with homosexuality (i.e., Focus on the Family). The respondents completed a series of survey questions that reflected the various constructs in Goodrich’s (2009) emergent model and the researchers conducted a path analysis to analyze the results. Goodrich and Gilbride (2010) concluded that spousal support and cognitively flexibility were associated with the ability of parents to cope with the discovery their son or daughter identifies as LGB. Additionally, they found parents who were religious and had higher levels of cognitive flexibility reported closer relationships with their LGB children than religious parents whose thinking was more rigid. These
findings seemed to add more depth to earlier studies (Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993) that associated parental acceptance with the level of religiosity. The authors theorized that cognitive flexibility could mediate the relationship between religiosity and parental reactions to coming out disclosures.

Baiocco et al. (2015) also examined the role of cognitive flexibility. They administered the PPRS and FACES III to 164 young adults and compared the results to data reflecting the age they came out, their parent’s political orientation and religiosity. The researchers calculated Pearson correlation coefficients to assess the relationships between family functioning and parental reactions. The authors found no statistically significant differences between the reactions of mothers and fathers. The results indicated medium correlation between negative coming out disclosures and the mother’s strength of political conservatism and religious involvement. The researchers also reported a high correlation between the parent’s negative reactions with the mother and father’s rigidity of views, and father’s strength of political conservatism. Baiocco et al. (2015) also conducted a hierarchical multiple regression analysis to investigate the significance of political orientation and religiosity. They found that a mothers negative reaction was predicted by the child’s gender (female), lower age, greater religious involvement, right-wing political conservatism, and rigid beliefs. Additionally, the father’s negative reactions to coming out disclosures were predicted by lower age, right wing political conservatism, and rigid beliefs. The authors did not report effect sizes for the regression. However, this study seemed to support findings from earlier studies that linked traditional values with negative parental reactions (Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993).
and provided evidence for Goodrich & Gilbride’s (2010) argument that rigid family beliefs predicted negative responses to the coming out disclosure.

It is clear parents respond both positively and negatively to their son or daughter coming out as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. The varying degree of their responses are influenced by a variety of factors including cohesion between family members and their coping strategies (Willoughby et al., 2006), political affiliation and religiosity (Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993), and cognitive flexibility (Goodrich & Gilbride, 2010). The degree to which the responses are perceived as negative or supportive can influence one’s sexual identity formation, coming out process, and overall mental health functioning.

Negative Parental Responses and Mental Health

Many researchers have studied the relationship between parental responses to an LGB child disclosing their sexual identity and the child’s well-being. Baiocco et al. (2016) examined the relationship between the factors that influence parental reactions (Goodrich & Gilbride, 2010; Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993; Willoughby et al., 2006) and the well-being of LGB youth. The authors sampled 150 adolescents from LGBT youth organizations who were between the ages of 16-19 during the time of the study. They administered the FACES IV to assess family functioning and PPRS (Willoughby et al., 2006) to evaluate the participant’s perceptions of their parent’s responses to their coming out disclosure. The authors conducted a path analysis to determine the effects of negative parental responses to coming out on one’s internalized sexual stigma, as influenced by political affiliation, religiosity, and rigidness of family structure. Rigid family structure and traditional family values predicted parental response would be more unsupportive than supportive. Furthermore, the LGB individuals who came out in an
unsupportive family environment reported higher levels of internal sexual stigma and decreased self-esteem, putting them at risk of mental health symptomology (Baiocco et al., 2016).

D’Augelli (2002) administered the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI) to a sample of 542 LGB youth. The authors also collected information related to the participant’s sexual identity, parents’ reactions to coming out, abuse related to their disclosure, and mental health related symptomology. To assess parental reactions, D’Augelli (2002) asked participants to rate how their parents reacted to their coming out disclosure on a four-point scale \( (1 = \text{Accepting} \text{ and} \ 4 = \text{Rejecting}) \).

Three-fourths of the sample reported their parents verbally abused them because of their sexual orientation and 15% of the sample reported physical abuse. Furthermore, the researcher found that the respondents with parents who were either unaware or rejecting of their sexual orientation scored lower on the BSI, signifying overall greater mental health symptomology. These findings support the notion that living in secrecy or fear because of one’s sexuality can be detrimental to one’s mental health. However, a limitation of this study was that the author did not operationalize his terms by providing a context of what “rejecting” and “accepting” entail (D’Augelli, 2002).

D’Amico, Julien, Tremblay, and Chartrand (2015) collected data from both LGB youth and their parents. The authors conducted 53 open-ended interviews with parents about their reactions related to their son or daughter coming out while simultaneously administering outcome measures to the LGB children themselves. The researchers found that the more parents talked about their struggles with their child’s sexual orientation, the more difficulties the child reported about their process identifying as
LGB. Moreover, mothers who struggled with accepting the sexual orientation of their children were associated with the child experiencing increased levels of psychological distress whereas fathers who struggled were associated with increased suicidal ideation. Conversely, children of supportive parents were more likely to express confidence in themselves and less likely to have suicidal thoughts (D’Amico, Julien, Tremblay, & Chartrand, 2015). The authors encouraged researchers to develop new interventions that can help parents adjust to new reality and find new ways of supporting their child after discovering their child identifies as LGB. Similar to D’Augelli (2002), the authors did not clarify how they defined “support.”

Other researchers have made similar conclusions as D’Amico et al. (2015) regarding parental reactions in relation to mental health symptoms. Pearson and Wilkinson (2013) investigated the associations between family relationships, risk behaviors of LGB youth, and depressive symptomology and found LGB youth who perceived less support from their families reported higher levels of depression, binge drinking, and drug use. Similarly, Rothman et al. (2012) studied the relationships between coming out, perceived parental support, and self-reported health conditions. They concluded that respondents who had not come out to their parents or experienced unsupportive reactions were more likely to report general health conditions, patterns of binge drinking and drug use, and depressive symptoms. In all three of these articles, the authors purported the lack of parental support was associated with decreased well-being (D’Amico et al., 2015; Pearson & Wilkinson, 2013; Rothman et al., 2012). However, none of the authors defined or operationalized the term “support.” Additionally, all three encouraged future researchers to investigate ways parents might
Bouris et al. (2010) also confirmed patterns of negative consequences post-disclosure after they conducted a systematic review of 31 quantitative articles related to parental influences on the mental health of LGB youth. The researchers evaluated studies that utilized samples of LGB youth between the ages of 10-24 and examined sexual behavior, substance use, violence and victimization, mental health, and suicide. The research team found that across the articles, negative parental responses to coming out disclosures were associated with increased psychological distress for LGB youth in each of these areas, whereas closer parent-child relationships were associated with decreased risk-taking behavior and increased overall well-being. The authors also argued the majority of the previous literature focused on negative parent influences. In turn, they called for additional research exploring how parents might positively influence the mental health of LGB youth (Bouris et al., 2010).

Supportive Parental Responses

In a literature review related to homosexual identity development, Beuty (1999) theorized that LGB adolescents raised by supportive families would develop a higher self-esteem and come out at an earlier age. Although there is a significant dearth in the literature related to the strategies and methods by which parents support their LGB sons and daughters, some studies have indeed examined support seeking strategies of sexual minorities. For instance, Nesmith, Burton, and Cosgrove (1999) conducted qualitative interviews with 17 LGB youth and young adults whom the authors recruited from a youth drop-in center in Seattle. The researchers asked the participants open-
ended questions related to their social support systems as sexual minorities. A content analysis revealed that the participants received support related to concrete, emotional, financial, or informational needs. Moreover, the participants revealed they often searched for parental figures that also identified as LGB outside of their family of origin for advice, role modeling, and nurturing. Although these authors identified ways LGB individuals seek support, they did not focus solely on ways they experience support directly from their family of origin or the benefits of perceived support.

In another study, Feinstein et al. (2014) examined whether parental acceptance of sexual orientation influenced the relationship between minority distress and depressive symptoms. The authors created an online survey to assess depressive symptoms using the Center for Epidemiological Studies Scale (CES-D) and minority stress on the dimensions of discrimination, internalized homonegativity, and rejection sensitivity. The authors also evaluated family support using a generalized family support scale, and parental acceptance using a 7-point Likert scale indicating how tolerant or hostile parents were towards their sexual orientation. A sample of 414 lesbians and gay men participated in the study. The results indicated that parental acceptance of sexuality was associated with less minority stress and decreased depressive symptoms (Feinstein et al., 2014). Moreover, parental acceptance moderated the association between the homonegativity and rejection dimensions of minority stress and depression. However, general family support did not moderate the associations between any of these variables. Based on these findings, the authors concluded that it is more important for individuals to know that parents accept their sexual orientation than it is to perceive they are providing general support. Similar to previous authors,
Feinstein et al. (2014) encouraged parents to reflect on how they might provide sexually related support to their children because of their minority status.

Parental support is also important for LGBT college students. Brandon-Friedman and Kim (2016) conducted an exploratory, cross-sectional study that examined the effect of five contexts of social support on identity development. The five domains of social support included joining a campus pride group, friends, family, significant others, and faith communities. They recruited participants from universities across the country and administered a modified version of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) to assess social support and the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity Scale (LGBIS) to measure sexual identity development. The researchers conducted a three step hierarchal multiple regression on each of the dependent variables from 70 respondents. They concluded that involvement in campus pride groups was the strongest predictor of sexual identity development, followed by support from family members. Although Brandon-Friedman and Kim (2016) concluded parental support is important for LGBT college students, they did not offer any specific strategies related to what these support strategies from family members might entail.

Ryan (2010) recognized the lack of literature pertaining to parental support and launched the Family Acceptance Project (FAP) to further research the influence of family reactions on the mental health of LGBT youth. Ryan, along with the FAP, executed one the most comprehensive studies related to sexuality-related support to date. Ryan’s research team interviewed 54 diverse families from across California with at least one family member who identified as an LGBT adolescent. Her team reviewed the interview transcripts and identified more than 106 different ways parents reacted to
their child’s sexual identity. The research team coded each reaction as either accepting \( n = 55 \) or rejecting \( n = 51 \) and used the results to construct the Family Acceptance Scale that measures the degree to which parents are supportive of their child’s sexual identity. Ryan et al. (2010) used the Family Acceptance Scale in a follow-up study that confirmed family acceptance predicted greater self-esteem, social support, and overall health status while protecting against depression, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation. Furthermore, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014) incorporated Ryan’s findings in their practitioners guide for helping families support LGBT children. Ryan continues to work with the FAP today to develop interventions that will help parents support their LGB children. Although Ryan’s work is indeed unique and examines the relationship between specific parental reactions to their child’s sexual orientation and mental health, her sample did not focus on the unique experiences of sexual minority college students.

Overall, although the manner by which parents provide sexuality-related support is vague, it is evident that perceived parental support is important for the well-being of all LGB individuals. Counselors are often tasked with helping parents foster supportive relationships with their adolescent and adult children who come out as LGB.

Role of Mental Health Counselors

Working with ALGBTIC, Harper et al. (2013) developed competencies designed to help counselors create supportive, safe, and empathetic spaces when they provide services to LGBTQQIA clients. They purported sexual minorities experience more daily stressors than heterosexual individuals and encouraged counselors to incorporate a social justice framework within their treatment approach sensitive to micro-aggressions.
and systematic forces of oppression. ALGBTIC provided a list of competencies for each of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Program’s (CACREP’s) eight core areas. Several of the competencies pertain to the coming out process. For example, one competency states counselors will “understand that coming out is an on-going and multi-layered process for LGBQQ individuals and that coming out may not be the goal for all individuals” (ALGBTIC, 2013, p. 9). Another competency directly mentions the client’s family of origin and encourages counselors to “understand that an LGBQQ individual’s family of origin group and/or structure may change over time, especially as it relates to the family’s acceptance/rejection of the LGBQQ member, and acknowledge the impact that being rejected from one’s family may have on the individual” (ALGBTIC, 2013, p. 9). Other competencies provided suggestions for counselors who would like to become allies. With respect to coming out, competent allies “acknowledge that the process and extent of coming out should be the decision of the individual” and “validate the potential struggle of LBGTQIQ persons as they navigate their coming out process through such techniques as empathic listening and reflective feedback” (ALGBTIC, 2013, p. 23). Although the competencies were precise and detailed in terms of what counselors should know and be aware of when they provide services to sexual minorities, they did not provide information related to specific interventions.

Throughout the literature, authors have described various treatment approaches and practices related to working with LGB individuals and their families. Saltzburg (2007) suggested narrative family therapy might be helpful for parents struggling to support their LGB sons and daughters. Using a narrative approach seems appropriate
for parents experiencing the stages of grief described by Savin-Williams and Dube (1998). For example, a counselor might help a parent re-story their hopes and expectations they had for their child as a way to help them shift their understanding of their child’s sexuality to find acceptance.

Willoughby and Doty (2010) described a brief cognitive-behavior approach by which they addressed the parents’ thoughts regarding sexuality and increased their exposure to topics pertaining to sexual orientation. A cognitive-behavioral approach might be helpful for parents with rigid views because parents with high cognitive flexibility are better able to adapt to their child’s disclosure (Baiocco et al., 2015).

LaSala (2013) acknowledged parents are often afraid for their child’s safety and encouraged counselors to help parents learn new ways to reframe their concerns in ways that do not invalidate the LGB person’s experience. Furthermore, Ford and Priest (2004) encouraged counselors to provide parents with psychoeducation materials that challenges or dispels myths related to the LGBTQQIA community. By teaching parents new ways to respond to their LGB sons or daughters, and providing resources to help them learn about their child’s needs, counselors can encourage parents to provide sexuality-related support that affirms sexual identity development (Feinstein et al. 2014).

Overall, more research related to counseling this population is needed. Woodward and Willoughby (2014) conducted a systematic review of the counseling literature pertaining to counseling this population, and identified fifteen studies that included recommendations for therapy. After synthesizing the results, they created general guidelines for counselors to follow when serving sexual minorities and their parents. They argued that therapeutic goals should be focused on building cohesion
and improving well-being and not changing the individual’s sexual orientation. They also recommended the therapist begin with individual sessions to assess both the family’s communication strategies and strengths. Furthermore, Woodward and Willoughby (2014) suggested parents be given space to share their genuine emotions regarding their child’s sexual orientation separately from the individual. Finally, during family sessions, the authors suggested focusing on helping the family build new communication strategies, connecting family members with resources, and reframing negative beliefs family members have about one another (Woodward & Willoughby, 2014). The authors also called for more studies related to designing counseling interventions for LGB individuals and their families.

Summary of Literature Review

In the preceding chapter, I provided an overview of various sexual identity development models and the process in which college students explore their sexual identity in college. I also discussed the coming out process, including the dynamics involved with coming out to one’s parents, the factors that influence parents reactions to coming out, and the impact of negative and supportive parental reactions on the overall well-being of LGB youth and young adults. I concluded the chapter with a discussion related to counseling interventions with LGB individuals and their parents.

Given that many students explore sexuality in college (Anders, Olmstead, & Johnson, 2016), it is important to consider the unique experiences of individuals who come out during the college experience to their parents while they are living on their own. Research suggests parental support contributes to the emotional well-being of first year college students (Sax & Weintraub, 2014) and sexuality-related parental support
contributes to the overall well-being of sexual minorities (Ryan et al., 2010).

Nonetheless, a detailed literature review revealed no studies that investigate the unique phenomenon of LGB college students who come out to parents while in college and perceived support. The literature reviewed in this chapter suggests that there are still gaps in the literature related to the ways parents support their children after a coming out disclosure. Although some authors are currently researching family acceptance strategies for LGBT youth (Ryan, 2010), there is a dearth of information related to parental support for LGB college students. The following study explored the lived experiences of LGB college students who feel supported by their parents throughout the coming out process.
APPENDIX C

EXTENDED METHODOLOGY
During their undergraduate experience, college students face new life experiences and challenges as they transition to college life and adulthood and learn how to live independently for the first time (Rhoads, 1997). One common experience that often arises for college freshman is the process of questioning one’s sexuality as many students come out of the closet as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Zubernis, Snyder, & McCoy, 2011). Thus far, much of the published research has focused on one’s negative experiences during the coming out process, such as rejection by peers, parents, and communities of faith (Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993; Rhoads, 1995). However, only a few researchers have explored coming out experiences to parents that are perceived by the individual as supportive, specifically during one’s college experience. Learning how parents specifically respond to their sons and daughters in ways that are encouraging and affirming, mental health counselors can inform parents of strategies they can use in supporting their LGB sons and daughters.

I will begin this chapter by connecting my proposed research question with my proposed method, a phenomenological analysis. I will then offer operational definitions for the major constructs of this study. Next, I will explain my selection criteria for participation, and how I recruited my participants. I will also include a detailed plan of how I will collect and analyze the data of the study. Finally, I will conclude this chapter with a description of techniques I will use to increase trustworthiness and address ethical considerations.

Research Question

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of college students who perceive support from their parents following a disclosure that they identity as lesbian,
gay, or bisexual. Specifically, I will focus on experiences perceived by the students as being accepting and supportive. Thus, my aim is to answer the following question:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of LGB college students who have perceived support from their parents during the coming out process?

Phenomenology

I used a phenomenological approach of gathering and analyzing data to answer this research question. Phenomenology is a qualitative method designed to help researchers understand how individuals create meaning from experience. I chose this approach because the aim of a phenomenological study is to explore how participants understand their social world and create meaning from experience (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The overall purpose of phenomenology is to describe the essence of an experience from the point of view of those who have experienced that phenomenon.

Husserl, the father of phenomenology, developed this approach to understand people’s subjective experiences of life (Hays & Singh, 2012). Husserl believed that “we can only know what we experience by attending to perceptions and meanings that awaken our conscious awareness” (Patton, 2002, p. 105). In other words, human beings subjectively interpret different phenomena and create meaning from these experiences. Phenomenological researchers aim to understand the meaning of a phenomenon from the perspective of a group of individuals who have directly experienced the event (Patton, 2002). Phenomenologists capture the essence of an event by examining individual experiences and finding commonalities among the different perspectives (Starks & Trinidad, 2007).
I selected a phenomenological approach for this study because I hoped to understand the lived experiences of LGB college students who perceive their parents as supportive. The phenomenological approach is aligned with a constructivist paradigm whereby individuals create their own view of reality based on social and cultural constructs (Patton, 2002). Constructivists believe that multiple realities exist in the world, and research participants can provide perspectives that reflect their own experience relative to their worldview (Hays & Wood, 2011). Therefore, I hoped to gain a new perspective of a lived reality by finding patterns and themes directly from the words of the participants themselves (Creswell, 2007).

Finally, previous researchers argued that more phenomenological research is need that pertains to LGBTQ topics. Singh and Shelton (2011) reviewed ten years’ worth of published articles in four counseling journals and only found twelve empirical qualitative studies related to LGBTQ issues. None of the twelve studies addressed support for the LGBT community, and only one of the studies utilized a phenomenological research method. I designed this study to expand on these themes in the literature and respond to Singh and Shelton’s (2011) concern.

Operational Definitions

For the purposes of this study, I used definitions posed by ALGBTIC in their article that provides competencies for counseling lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, questioning, intersex, and ally individuals (Harper et al., 2013).

1) Gay – “A person who is emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to members of the same gender” (p. 42).
2) *Lesbian* – “A woman who is emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to other women” (p. 43).

3) *Bisexual* – “A person emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to more than one sex, gender, or gender identity though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way, or to the same degree” (p. 41).

I also defined the following terms based on previous work by Rust (2003) and Orne (2011).

4) *Coming out* – The process whereby an individual recognizes they are attracted to the same gender, assumes an LGB identity, discloses their LGB identity to others, and manages their LGB identity relative to social context.

5) *Outness* – The degree to which an individual recognizes they are attracted to the same gender, assumes an LGB identity, discloses their LGB identity to others, and manages their LGB identity relative to social context.

Additionally, I defined the following term:

6) *Parent* – A biological, adoptive, foster, or step-father or mother who served as a primary caregiver throughout the course of one’s upbringing.

Finally, comparable to other authors who have conducted qualitative studies with the LGB population (Goodrich, 2009), I purposely decided not to operationalize the constructs of support or sexuality-related support because I do not want to assume how the participants of the study will define these terms.

**Participants**

All participants were between the ages of 18-24 years old and currently enrolled in an undergraduate program to participate in this study. These requirements ensured
that I recruited a representative sample of traditional college students. Previous researchers have found that older LGB individuals report different coming out experiences than younger generations (Grov, Bimbi, Nanin, & Parsons, 2006; Schope, 2002). By specifying age, I ensured my participants directly experienced the phenomenon of “going away” to college and coming out to their parents.

Participants also identified as cisgender and lesbian, gay, or bisexual to participate in this study. Individuals who identified as queer would also be eligible to participate if they also identified as LGB. However, participants who identify as transgender were not eligible to participate in this study because previous researchers have suggested that their experiences are different from those who identify as LGB and should be considered independently (Zimman, 2009).

Given Rhoads (1994) argument that college provides a freedom to explore oneself, all participants must had come out to their parents during the college experience and could not have been living with their parents during the time of that disclosure. This study was unique because it sought to capture the unique experiences of individuals who come out to their parents during the college experience. This criterion ensured that I learned about the nature of parental support after the participant had moved away from home.

Finally, potential participants must have experienced support related to their sexual identity from at least one of their parents, and had to have been willing to share that experience. If one parent did not provide support, the participant was still eligible because they were still able to provide insight related to the nature of support based on their experiences with the parent who did support them. In addition, this criterion
facilitated in recruiting a sample that distinguished sexuality-related support specific to their coming out process from other forms of support.

Research Team

The research team consisted of myself, three other research team members, and a supervising researcher. At the time of this study, I was a third year doctoral candidate of counseling, with research interests in counseling the LGBTQQIA community. I identify as a White, gay, cisgender male and came out to both of my parents in college. I experienced both positive and negative experiences in my own process of coming out to my parents.

The research team also included other members diverse in race, gender, sexuality, and experience. One team member identifies as White, heterosexual, cisgender, and female. She was completing the second year of a doctoral program in counseling at the time of the study. She shared that she did not have personal coming out experiences, but had close friends who have had both positive and negative coming out experiences. Another team member identifies as White, gay, cisgender, and male. He was completing his first year of doctoral work in counseling at the time of the study. He shared that he had come out to both parents in High School and experienced both positive and negative reactions to his disclosure. The final team member was an advanced Master’s student who was in the final semester of her clinical internship at the time of the study. She identifies as Iranian, bisexual, cisgender, and female. She shared she was currently in a relationship with a cisgender male, and had not come out to her parents. Finally, the supervising researcher (White, heterosexual, cisgender, and female) is an assistant professor in a Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related
Educational Programs (CACREP) accredited Counselor Education & Supervision program with experience teaching a variety of counseling courses and mentoring doctoral student researchers in quantitative and qualitative research methods. All members of the research team obtained a certificate that they completed Protection of Human Subjects training prior to beginning the study.

Data Sources

There were three sources of data for this study. First, potential participants completed a demographics questionnaire using Qualtics, an online survey management service. Participants answered questions pertaining to their (a) gender, (b) age, (c) race/ethnicity, (d) geographical location, (e) religiosity as a child, (f) current religiosity, (g) whether they are enrolled at a college or university, (h) sexual orientation, (i) the age at which they first internally acknowledged they identified as LGB, (j) whether they disclosed to their parents they were LGB in college, living at a different address, and felt supported in their disclosure, (k) which parent was supportive, and (l) the age at which they disclosed their sexual identity to their parents. I also asked potential participants to provide their email address and phone number for future contact. Finally, I asked each participant to select a pseudonym to maintain his or her confidentiality. I provided a copy of the demographics questionnaire in Appendix F.

The second data source involved interviewing the selected participants and transcribing the results. I contacted selected participants to participate in a 45-60 minute semi-structured interview. The interviews were conducted to solicit information about the participant’s experiences coming out to their parents and perceiving support related
to their disclosure. I will provide more in depth information about the interview protocol in the procedures section.

Finally, members of the research team kept a reflective journal to record their assumptions, impressions, attitudes, and ideas throughout the study. I encouraged the members of the research team to reflect on the content of their journal to ensure they were bracketing their preconceived biases. As a team, we met and discussed the content of our journals. The journal was also used as an additional data source (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

Procedures

Recruitment

The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the University of North Texas’ (UNT) Institutional Review Board (IRB). After receiving approval, I began recruiting participants. Consistent with Smith and Osborn (2003), I wanted to focus my sample on the quality of data versus the quantity of participants. Creswell (2006) recommended recruiting a sample size of up to ten participants for a phenomenological study, whereas Starks & Trinidad (2007) said smaller sample sizes of 1-10 participants could provide enough details of a phenomenon to convey the core elements of the experience. Therefore, I aimed to recruit between 7-10 participants for the study.

Due to the specific nature of the research question, random sampling was not possible. Rather, I used purposive and snowball sampling methods (Creswell, 2007) to recruit participants both locally, nationally, and internationally. I recruited participants through word of mouth, personal contacts, online advertising, emails to university LGB student groups, and posts in online Facebook groups.
Potential participants received a link to review the informed consent and complete the demographics questionnaire via Qualtrics. I used the responses to these questions to screen participants to ensure they met all eligibility requirements for participation. A total of 37 individuals responded to the survey. However, thirteen respondents were no longer enrolled in college, seven respondents said they did not come out to their parents while they were in college, two respondents did not perceive their parents to be supportive of their disclosure, two respondents were still living at home when they came out, one respondent did not identify as LGB, and one respondent had left the majority of the prompts blank. A total of nine respondents met all criteria and were considered for participation in the study.

Next, I contacted interested participants who met criteria via telephone to explain the study, answer questions, and schedule a one-hour semi-structured interview with the participant that would take place via Skype. I also reminded participants that all interviews would be audio recorded via recording software and transcribed to ensure effective documentation of the interview. One participant did not respond to my phone call and therefore was not included. Additionally, between the time of the initial phone call and the scheduled interview, one participant shared they could no longer participate because their circumstances with their family had changed. The final sample included seven participants: five students in the United States, one student in Canada, and one student from the United States who was currently studying abroad in Israel.

Data Collection

Before starting each interview, I reviewed the informed consent with each participant including the purpose and procedures of the study, potential benefits and
risks related to participation, and the participant’s right to withdrawal from the study at any time. I also provided the participant an opportunity to ask any additional questions before beginning the interview.

I used a semi-structured interview guide to conduct a 45-60 minute interview. A semi-structured interview format allowed me to ask a set of structured questions with the added flexibility to ask clarifying or follow up questions (Patton, 2002). Seidman (2006) encouraged phenomenological researchers to conduct three separate interviews related to reviewing life history, exploring present-day experiences, and discovering how they made meaning of those experiences. However, Seidman (2006) also acknowledged that modifications to his structure were acceptable. Although I did not have the resources to conduct three different interviews with each participant, I infused these three types of questions into my protocol. Furthermore, Moustakas (1994) said questions should be tailored to capture a specific phenomenon but not so specific that participants feel led to give specific responses. Therefore, I constructed questions that were clear and precise with minimal bias (Hays & Singh, 2006).

The final interview protocol consisted of nine questions grounded in previous research and rooted in Seidman’s three phases (2006). Questions pertaining to life history asked the participant’s to reflect on their process of self-identifying as LGB (Cass, 1979; Troiden 1989), their relationship with their parents prior to their disclosure (Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl. 2006), and the reasons for making the disclosure (Ben-Ari, 1995a). Questions pertaining to the details of the phenomenon asked the participant to share their experience during and after the disclosure to their parents, how they perceived their parents responses, and how being in college influenced the overall
experience. Finally, questions pertaining to how the participants made meaning of the experience inquired how participants understand the coming out process today (Hays & Singh, 2012). The full interview guide is included in Appendix F.

At the end of each interview, I asked each participant for permission to contact them with follow up questions on a later date. I also reminded participants that I would maintain their confidentiality throughout the remainder of the study. After each interview, I de-identified the recordings and send them to a professional transcriptionist to transcribe verbatim. I saved each transcript on a password protected USB drive and deleted all original audio recordings after I verified the transcripts for accuracy.

Before starting the data analysis process, the research team engaged in the process of *epoche*, a Greek word meaning “to stay away from” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). Consistent with the phenomenological tradition, the research team members sought to identify and suspend current beliefs and judgments related to the phenomenon of coming out to one’s parents (Hays & Singh, 2012). To accomplish this task, each member of the research team reflected on their previous knowledge and experiences related to the coming out process (Moustakas, 1994). In a reflexive journal, members of the research team responded to four prompts about their current assumptions and biases related to the research questions in a journal, and processed their responses as a group. I encouraged members of the research team to “bracket” their beliefs to disengage past experiences and limit how their own views cloud their understanding of the participant’s responses (Moustakas, 1994). A summary of this process will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Data Analysis
To analyze the data, I used an adapted version of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) classic data analysis using an inductive-deductive approach. This analysis process involved seven different steps related to reducing and understanding data. The seven steps include: taking notes, summarizing notes, playing with words, making comparisons, developing preliminary codes, initial coding, and final coding (Miles et al., 2014).

The research team began to develop the initial coding manual using three transcripts that were selected based on diversity in gender, sexuality, and experience. In the first step, taking notes, each member of the research team independently read the three transcripts. As they read, they divided the transcriptions into ten line segments and write notes related to their initial reactions in the margins (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). In the second step, summarizing notes, the research team shared their reactions to the material and compared their written notes. The research team discussed commonalities and differences between their findings and developed a summary sheet based on their perspectives. Then, during the playing with words task, the research team used the summary sheet to create phrases that captured their understanding of the patterns across the three transcripts. Then, the research team made comparisons as they re-examined the key phrases and grouped them into different themes and sub-themes. The research team engaged in the process of horizontalization whereby they reduced the data by combining similar phases into common themes that became the preliminary coding manual (Creswell, 2013).

After the research team developed preliminary codes, they began the process of initial coding. Each team member independently applied the codes to the initial first
three transcripts. After individual coding, the research team discussed differences between their codes and made adaptations to the coding manual. The research then independently re-coded the initial three transcripts and an additional fourth transcript. The research team met again to discuss discrepancies and readjust the codes until they reached a mean agreement of .86 - .90 agreement (Bakerman & Gottman, 1986). The research team reached a mean inter-rater agreement of .92 and finalized the coding manual.

During final coding, the research team applied the final coding manual with each of the remaining interviews. Each transcript was independently coded by all four members of the research team. After meeting to discuss discrepancies, I calculated the inter-rater agreement between all the coders for all seven transcripts. Overall, the research team agreed 96% of the time, and therefore established credibility (Bakerman & Gottman, 1986).

After the research team finished the coding process, I sent a summary of the codes to the participants to ensure the themes adequately described their lived experiences. Five of the seven participants responded to my request. After reading the summary, their comments included: “everything resonated with my experience,” “you really captured our conversation,” and “these impressions are very representative of a college student’s coming out process.” One participant also said after the interview they remembered their parents had also helped them come out to extended family members. Although this theme was not specifically reflected in the results, other participants shared their parents provided support when extended family were not affirming.

Trustworthiness
Morrow (2005) outlined four strategies to increase trustworthiness and rigor in qualitative studies: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I addressed each of these features throughout the study to document rigor.

Morrow (2005) compared credibility with internal consistency whereby authors show readers they have taken steps to ensure rigor. In the current study, credibility refers to whether the final coding manual truly represents the sample's lived experiences of coming out to their parents. I strengthened credibility of my study in three ways. First, I used triangulation with three other research team members to minimize biases throughout the process of developing the coding manual. Second, I facilitated the process of research reflexivity with the research team whereby we engaged in *epoche* and reflected on our previous experiences. For example, as a gay, White male with previous negative coming out experiences, it was important for me to stay engaged in this process by journaling about my experiences and discussing my biases with the research team. Finally, I conducted member checks by asking the participants to review the final coding manual for accuracy.

Secondly, Morrow (2005) compared transferability with external validity and generalizability whereby a reader can understand a study's results within their own worldview and apply the results to the general population. Given the phenomenological nature of this study, I cannot generalize my findings to all LGB college students who come out to their parents. However, I hoped to establish transferability by sharing as many details as possible about the setting of this study, myself as the researcher, the research team, and the demographics of the participants. By providing this information, readers can make an informed decision of how to apply the findings to other contexts.
Third, Morrow (2005) compared dependability with reliability whereby a researcher conducts a study consistently using well-established methods and techniques. I demonstrated dependability by keeping an audit trail of all research activities throughout the entire process of conducting this study and sharing the audit trial with my research supervisor. I also plan to share details about my methodology in any manuscripts related to my work so researchers could replicate the study in the future.

Finally, Morrow (2005) compared confirmability with objectivity whereby a researcher acknowledges they cannot be fully objective or bias-free. Although biases were inevitable because phenomenological research relies on the subjective experience of the person (Hays & Wood, 2011), I took steps throughout the study to limit biases and ensure the findings represent the phenomenon and not the beliefs of the researcher. The research team met regularly to reflect on their experiences and discuss how these biases could be influencing our data analysis. I also integrated the process of triangulation (Hays & Singh, 2012) whereby I include multiple researchers and multiple data sources to ensure readers will perceive this study as trustworthy. I will demonstrate confirmability using the same techniques I used to establish credibility.

Overall, this chapter provided a detailed discussion related to this study’s philosophical foundations, research questions, criteria for participation, data collection procedures, data analysis plan, and steps to increase credibility. In the following chapter, I will share the results from this investigation.
APPENDIX D

EXTENDED RESULTS
In this chapter, I will present the results of a phenomenological study that explored the lived experiences of LGB college students who came out to their parents in college and perceived support. I used three data sources in my analysis: a reflexive journal completed by members of the research team, a demographics survey, and transcripts from seven semi-structured interviews. Data from each of these sources is analyzed below.

Research Team Reflexive Journal

Before beginning the data analysis process, the research team responded to four prompts in reflexive journals. The four prompts included: (1) What are your prior experiences related to this topic? (2) What beliefs do you have related to this topic? (3) What types of responses, if any, could elicit an emotional reaction from you as the researcher? (4) What do you expect we might find in our study? The research team spent approximately thirty minutes recording their responses to the four questions in a journal, and then discussed their reactions. Throughout the data analysis process, the research team revisited their reflections in order to bracket their beliefs. I will now share a summary of the research team’s reflections.

Question One: What are your prior experiences related to this topic?

Two team members shared their own personal experiences of coming out to their parents. Both team members felt nervous when they disclosed their sexuality and both experienced support from one parent and rejection from the other. Both team members were told by at least one parent that “being gay is a sin” and both felt frustrated with one of their parents responses. On the other hand, the supportive parents had both told the team members they wanted them to be happy and loved.
A third team member identified as bisexual and shared she had not experienced a specific coming out process because she was female and engaged to a male. She also shared she believes being female and bisexual precludes her from being judged as harshly as someone who identifies as gay or lesbian. The team member also said she was aware of acquaintances who have had negative coming out experiences due to their parent’s religious beliefs.

The fourth team member identified as heterosexual and shared her experience having friends who struggled with coming out to their parents. The team member said one of her friends was surprised when he came out to his parents because he felt more supported then he expected. She also said she had another friend who had yet to come out to his parents because of his Catholic roots. The team member shared she feels angry when she thinks about people who do not have close relationships with their parents because they are rejected due to their sexuality.

Question 2: What beliefs do you have regarding this topic?

The research team discussed preconceived notions and biases related to parental support of LGB individuals. Some of the team members shared personal biases that conservative and religious parents would be more likely to reject their children during coming out disclosures whereas those with liberal beliefs would be more likely to be affirming. Similarly, some members of the research team shared parents living in the rural South would be less affirming than parents who lived in other geographical areas. Finally, some team members guessed that mothers would be more accepting of their LGB children than fathers.
The research team also reflected on their views related to the importance of parental support for LGB youth and young adults. They agreed that support was important to development, and they expressed concern that rejection could lead to suicide and other mental health concerns. They also said they thought parental support would involve listening, conveying love, and offering unconditional support. One team member added that coming out does not end with the initial disclosure, but continues as an individual becomes more authentic in their sexuality.

Question 3: What types of responses could elicit an emotional reaction from you?

The research team shared potential responses they believed could cause them to react positively or negatively. Some of the team members recognized that heartwarming stories involving strong parent and child bonds could make them feel hopeful or inspired. One team member said they would feel proud of families who were able to integrate religious faith with the love for their child. Another team member said they might feel envious if they read about grand gestures that demonstrate unconditional love and acceptance.

The research team also shared potential feelings that could arise as they read stories that involve rejection and or shame. The team members said they would feel empathy for individuals with negative coming out stories. One team member said they might feel annoyed if parents identified their child’s sexuality as a sin. Another team member acknowledged they might be more sensitive to individuals who share challenging religious experiences.

Question 4: What do you expect we might find in our study?
The research team shared a number of ideas related to what they thought they would find. Some of the team members talked about the role of religion. Some believed those who did not have a religious upbringing would feel more supported, while others believed those with a religious upbringing would feel surprised if they did perceive support. Others said they expected there to be no differences between the responses of mothers and fathers.

The research team shared what they thought could be perceived as supportive behaviors. Some of their thoughts included telling their child being gay is not a choice, using intentional and inclusive language, engaging in follow-up conversations, and standing up for their child when they face difficult situations. One team member said they thought participants might express feelings of gratitude for their experience, while another said they thought participants might express fears of abandonment even when they felt supported. Finally, one team member shared she thought the team would find that support would lead to overall positive implications for well-being. She also said she was hopeful that the team would find there are great and accepting people in the world who have had a positive impact on their child’s development.

Participant Demographics

A total of nine participants qualified and were selected for participation in this study. The participants’ demographics are summarized in Table D.1.

Table D.1 Demographics of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Age Came out to Self</th>
<th>Age Came out to Parents</th>
<th>Supportive Parents</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AJ</td>
<td>24</td>
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<td>Latino</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Carrie</em></td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Spiritual not religious</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jo</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Spiritual not religious</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Margaret</em></td>
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<td>Agender</td>
<td>White, Latinx</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Pagan / Roman Catholic</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mariah</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>12/13</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Mid Atlantic</td>
<td>16/17</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosie</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Spiritual not religious</td>
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<td>Tom</td>
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<td>Midwest</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Participant did not complete the study*

Of the nine qualifying participants, seven participated in the study. Margaret did not return the phone call with a request to schedule an interview. Carrie scheduled an interview, but cancelled prior to the appointment. Carrie shared in a message that her situation had changed, and she no longer qualified to participate in the study. Carrie did not elaborate on her circumstances. The final sample was comprised of seven participants.

**Themes**

The research team conducted a phenomenological study of the seven interviews using an adapted version of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) classic data analysis approach. Throughout the process, they identified nine major themes and thirteen sub-themes across the participants. The coding manual is provided in Table D.2 and a graphic depicting the flow of themes is provided in Figure D.1. The themes are also summarized in the following sections.
Table D.2: Coding Manual

1. Awareness of Feeling Different
   - Lack of visibility of other LGBTQIA individuals
   - Lack of understanding of LGBTQIA identity
   - Knowledge that LGBTQIA identity is in the minority
   A. Compelled to keep sexuality hidden from others
      - Feeling anxious about how others would respond
   B. Fear of persecution due to religion, culture, or environment

2. Positive relationship with parent prior to coming out
   A. Intimate relationship with parents prior to disclosure
      - Feelings of closeness and trust
      - Openness to sharing about aspects of one’s life
   B. Parents were open-minded
      - Prior experience with LGBTQIA community
      - Prior support related to self-expression and interests

3. College experience impacted the coming out process
   A. Experienced newfound freedom and autonomy
      - Safety to explore one’s sense of self
   B. Normalization of LGBTQIA culture
      - Connecting with other members of LGBTQIA community
      - Exposure to and acceptance of diversity
      - Seeing others who have come out happy and wanting that experience
   C. Desire to be fully known by parents

4. Participant was unsure of how parents would respond to coming out disclosure
   A. Feeling anxious before and during coming out disclosure
   B. Disclosure was unplanned or spontaneous

5. Parents assured continued love and acceptance during and after disclosure
   - Parents emphasized desire for their child to be happy
   - Parents expressing love for their child regardless of sexuality

6. Parents affirmed LGB identity during and after the disclosure
   - Parents normalized sexuality through casual conversations related to identity, sex and relationships
   - Parents responded casually when talking about LGB identity
   - Parents stated they had prior awareness of LGB identity
   A. Parents asked intentional questions to learn more about their child and the LGB community
   B. Parents were welcoming toward their child’s potential partners
   C. Parents encouraged their child regarding experiences of fear and discrimination.
   D. Parents performed acts of service that promoted child’s expression of LGB identity.
      - Parents advocated for LGBTQIA community
      - Parents assisted child in their efforts to connect with the LGBTQIA community.

7. Increased relational depth with parents after coming out
   - More comfort with being open and transparent with parents
   - Increased sense of safety and security within relationship with parents
   - Feeling relieved that parents are aware of identity

8. Increased sense of authenticity after coming out to parents
   - Increased self-confidence and acceptance of sexual identity
   - Increased readiness and desire to come out to others
   - Feeling more connected to LGBTQ community

9. Appreciation for family’s response and overall support
   - Thankfulness for family support
   - Reaffirmed value and importance of family
   - Increased sense of gratitude for coming out experience given other members of LGBTQIA community experience rejection
   - Expressed overall satisfaction with coming out experience

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Figure D.1: Coding Graphic

Theme 1: Awareness of Feeling Different

All seven participants shared they went through a period of recognizing they felt different from their peers as they internally recognized they identified as lesbian or gay. Their feelings varied in scope and intensity as some participants reported distressing experiences whereas others navigated the process easily.
I grew up in a pretty Orthodox home, so when I first started realizing that the reason I’m different is because I’m gay, as usual I was very self-hateful. (AJ)

I knew something inside was different, I didn’t see it as a negative thing at all, but I just could tell I wasn’t with the other girls; I didn’t like boys …So it wasn’t really hard for me. I wasn’t hard on myself. I didn’t feel bad because I knew there was nothing wrong with me. (Mariah)

So the fourth Harry Potter movie, Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, Daniel Radcliffe strips down, and I’m pretty sure I got a hard-on during that scene in the theatre, so that was probably the…really brought it home that I was different. (Michael)

Internally, it felt like I had to readjust everything that I thought about myself, because in high school, I was just never interested in boys, but I never thought anything of it, because I was just like they’re a distraction. (Jo)

Some of the participants also shared they felt different because they noticed the lack of visibility and exposure to other LGBTQIA individuals in their lives and community.

There was only like one “out” person at my high school the entire four years I was there and it wasn’t fun for them. (Rosie)

Living in a rural area I never had exposure to any of that so I never knew tactics of coming out. (Tom)

It was just that year was a blur because I was so stressed and so… I did not know what to do. I had no one to turn to. I didn’t know anyone else who was gay or who was in the queer community, so I was just so distraught, and I had nowhere to turn it felt like. (Natalie)

I grew up in a small town and this sort of thing wasn’t…it still wasn’t normal or recognized. I mean, we didn’t go over these sort of feelings in health class, I didn’t know what was going on. I didn’t feel like I had anybody to talk to. (Michael)

As the participant’s shared their internal coming out experiences, two sub-themes emerged related to concealing their identity, and feeling afraid of possible persecution from others because of their sexuality.

Sub-theme 1A: Compelled to keep sexuality hidden from themselves or others.

All seven of the participants reported a period of time where they felt unsure of who they
were, and whether they could share their feelings with others. Some of the participants discussed what it was like denying their sexuality while coming to terms with their feelings.

It is stressful growing up and hiding it for a while when you’re in the closet and then slowly coming out, and finally coming out. It affects every aspect of your life because even though I was already a happy, calm, chill person, not being fully who I was before I came out and came to terms with it, it effects everyday life, even in the smallest ways. (Rosie)

I never had negative opinions about gay people or anything like that. It felt like I Was going to have to show other people that I wasn’t … I felt like I had been lying to everyone I guess, because deep down I should have already had known. (Jo)

I disregarded all those feelings and convinced myself that I wasn’t gay. Then in 11th grade I started to realize that I was different and classified myself as bisexual, even though I realized that I still never had a lot of straight feelings. (Tom)

Others shared experiences of keeping their identity hidden from others as they believed they had to keep their identity a secret from their parents and others.

Around the time that I started figuring out I was gay, I actually came up with this little convoluted story that I had a crush on a girl in school so that she [Mom] wouldn’t have any suspicion because I was well aware that she wouldn’t take it well. (AJ)

Hiding that part of me was really upsetting to me. (Mariah)

You didn’t want to go to the Gay-Straight Alliance that they started rather belatedly, or to the guidance counselors, because you didn’t want to be singled out as that. (Michael)

The participant’s narratives seemed to reflect a process whereby they recognized they felt anxious as they pondered what coming out would mean for themselves and their relationship with others. For some participants, this process was influenced by feeling afraid of how others would respond to their disclosure.
Sub-theme 1B: Fear of persecution due to religion, culture, or environment. Six out of the seven participants reported specific fears related to how others would respond if they revealed their sexuality. These fears seemed rooted in potential harassment, rejection, or persecution. Several participants talked about religion influencing their fears to come out of the closet.

But took me a really really long time. I was sure I was going to hell. (AJ)

However, my parents, they never exactly talked about it. They were never exposed to it. They grew up in a rural community and they grew up in religious families so I was very nervous as to how they’d take it purely because I wasn’t even sure what their views on it were. (Tom)

My mom was and still is very religious. She is Christian, so just growing up, we didn’t really talk about homosexuality as it being kind of projected in mainstream media as Christianity being so anti-gay. We kind of just swept it under the rug, but I still knew that Bible teaches it as a sin, so when I first kind of said, “Oh crap, This might be…I might be gay,” I really suppressed that. (Natalie)

Others talked about concealing their sexuality because of specific factors related to their environment at school.

People already made fun of me for being gay, even before I knew what it was. I didn’t want it to be true, and so for a long time, I tried to pass it off as just as phase, or say, well maybe I was bi. (Michael)

I played a sport…I didn’t know how they were going to feel about it because people are still immature in high school so I didn’t want to deal with that to be honest with you. (Mariah)

But school was derogatory terms against LGBT were used as insults like, “Oh, that’s so gay. That’s queer,” so I never really wanted to come out when I lived at home. Then I just ignored it for awhile. (Rosie)

As the participants shared their reservations, they also discussed what their relationships were like with their parents before they disclosed their sexual identity to them.
Theme 2: Positive Relationship with Parent Prior to Coming Out

All seven participants reported positive qualities about the relationship with their parents before coming out to them. AJ and Michael identified one parent they were not especially close with, but said that they knew that parent loved them and were there for them.

We never really talk, but it was like, okay, I never really felt like I didn’t have him. I knew I could still count on him if something happened, but we just didn’t talk. (AJ)

It was a volatile relationship with him [dad]. I still knew that he loved me, but we fought more than we had fun together. I always felt closer to my mum for the longest time. (Michael)

However, most of the participants reported they had close relationships with at least one of their parents before coming out. The close connections between the participants and their parents emerged in two subthemes related to intimacy and open-mindedness.

Sub-theme 2A: Intimate relationship with parents prior to disclosure. Six out of seven participants revealed they had intimate relationships with their parents before coming out to them. Some of the participants shared they felt very close to their parents throughout their lives and felt supported throughout their lives.

We do a lot of family things. They always have asked how I am and asked about my life and things like that so I’d say I’ve always been pretty close before I came out them. (Tom)

I guess they’ve always been there to see the achievements I’ve done, and they’ll make a point to come to things that are important to me, and sit down and take the time to talk to me about my day, and things like that. I feel like I’ve never questioned how much they care about me. (Jo)

Other participants describing open and understanding relationships with their parents that allowed them to be honest with their parents about most of what was happening in their lives.
Growing up, there was a lot of trust. I never had curfew or strict rules as long as I told my parents where I was and what I was doing, it was fine. At home, and with my immediate family, it was always very open. We could tell each other anything. We could do whatever we wanted as long as we weren’t causing physical or mental harm to anyone. (Rosie)

My Dad and I have a lot in common, and I didn’t really realize that back then, so back then I could really talk with my Dad about anything. (Natalie)

Oh God, I was a mama’s boy! Ever since I have a memory, I always was, I remember, trying to be as close as I possibly could with her. I told her everything, everything, everything. (AJ)

The participants seemed to have felt a genuine openness with their parents. As they shared aspects of their relationship, another sub-theme emerged related to their parent’s open-mindedness.

Sub-theme 2B: Parents were open-minded. As the participants discussed their relationships with their parents, they seemed to express a sense of safety within their relationships even before they came out. This sense of security seemed to be fostered by a parent’s sense of open-mindedness. Some of the participants (n = 4) described their parents as being liberal or open to different lifestyles and worldviews.

I always tell my friends that I feel like I had an abnormal childhood, just in the sense that my parents never pushed any spiritual belief system on us, and they never really pushed who they wanted us to be, and so they always just let us be us. We had a really good … or we still have a really good relationship before all of it happened. (Jo)

My family’s always been very socially liberal. My mum was raised in that kind of social liberal ideology. (Michael)

Others added that their parents had previous experience with the LGBT community.

He [Dad] used to have these three gay best friends. All their names were Dennis, which was weird, but whatever. They would call themselves “The Three Dennis’s.” They would come to my house; we would have dinner with them; they would sleep over. It wasn’t anything weird or out of the ordinary. They didn’t pinpoint it as something you should be ashamed of; it’s just a part of you. (Mariah)
I had a cousin that was gay and I knew they were totally fine with it. My parent’s outlook is really like, “As long as you’re happy and you’re not hurting anyone, or yourself, then we have no problem with anything you do.” (Rosie)

Rosie also mentioned that her parents were supportive of different forms of self-expression.

When I went through my little Goth phase, my sister was like, “Oh, well. Okay lets recheck yourself,” and then my Mom was like, “No, she likes this, it’s fine,” and went and bought me jackets and buckles and chains, and everything was black. They were just like, “You know what, this is how you’re expressing yourself right now, let’s just go for it.” (Rosie)

Although more than half of the participants perceived their parents as open-minded, and all seven described positive relationships with their parents, they all waited until they went to college before they came out to their parents.

Theme 3: College experience impacted the coming out process

Each of the seven participants attested that leaving home and going away to college had a profound impact on their coming out process. Several participants shared that going away to college made them more comfortable with themselves by providing opportunities to explore their identity.

Then I went to college and then realized, “Oh, no. I definitely like girls in a relationship aspect.” I think it was freshman year of college, I was 18, when I was finally like, “Okay, no. This is a thing. This is who I am.” (Rosie)

Going away to college impacted me in that I was able to more thoroughly explore my sexuality in that I was in groups of people who are queer who were identifying things as things that I’ve never even heard of, so I could more fully explore who I was. (Natalie)

School is five hours away from home, and so it gave me distance away from who I thought I needed to be for everyone else, and so within my first year of college, I started questioning, and I ended up having an encounter with someone. (Jo)
AJ expressed similar feelings as Rosie and Natalie, and shared his experience that included several sub-themes.

I figured while I’m here, why not try it out and see what all the fuss is about. That’s when I met all the gay people and I made gay friends and I started dating someone and it was like, oh, okay, so maybe that is something that I really should let other people know, especially my family. (AJ)

AJ’s story was similar to what other participants shared throughout their interviews. Three sub-themes arose in other narratives, including finding newfound freedom and autonomy, having exposure to LGBTQIA culture, and feeling an increased desire to come out and be fully known by parents.

Sub-theme 3A: Experience newfound freedom and autonomy. Four of the participants shared that going away to college afforded them independence that they would not have had while living with their parents. The distance away from their parents provided the participants with space to further discover and explore their sexuality.

When I came to college and I was living in the dorms, it was more like, oh, I’m really alone. I could bring a guy home, and I wouldn’t have to explain it to anyone. (AJ)

I moved a state away for college. I was completely; I didn’t know anyone around me. Everything was new. I was in a new environment. I was at a new school I was living with new roommates who I didn’t know and my family was an entire state away. (Rosie)

There’s just that openness to figure out myself without having my parents there to help guide me, and I think that independence let me find myself faster than if I had my parents guiding me on some level. (Jo)

Not only did college offer space for the participants to feel more independent, but it also provided opportunities for them to interact with members of the LGBTQIA community.

Sub-theme 3B: Normalization of LGBTQIA culture. Six of the seven participants talked about college helped normalize LGBTQIA culture. The participants shared their
experiences connecting with members of the LGBTQIA community, which in turn helped them to learn to appreciate diversity and accept their own sexuality.

I came to realize, this isn’t so bad. It’s not a curse. I’m not going to die miserable. I’m not going to die alone. It’s fun. People that are like me are really fun, and we have our own clubs, and we have a parade once a year. (AJ)

There’s the gay village...the presence of that and getting involved in DLP (ΔΛΦ) certainly helped me become more comfortable with the idea of being gay, and provided access to the gay community that I didn’t have back home. (Michael)

I guess it wasn’t until college when I got some exposure to a lot of new people and new information about the LGBTQ community that I never was exposed to at home, I started to realize and come to terms that I’m gay. I just had to come out to myself before I could come out to other people. (Tom)

Mariah added that meeting others in college who have fully come out and embraced their sexuality made her want that experience for herself.

Once I came to college, you see all these people, especially as a freshman and looking at upper classmen, they’re out, they’re happy, they’re doing their internships, they’re doing this, they’re doing that. They’re just so open and it’s so cool and so awesome to see somebody who is like me being happy. (Mariah)

Mariah’s experience of seeing others happy seemed to normalize her sexuality. All of the participants appeared to feel an overall sense of safety and encouragement to explore themselves in college. As the participants shared their college experience, a third sub-theme emerged as they talked about their parents who were still at home.

Sub-theme 3C: Desire to be fully known by parents. As they shared their experiences coming out in college, five of the seven participants also shared they felt a desire to be more fully known by their parents. Some of the participants noticed they felt a barrier between themselves and their parents.

Here I’m out and I’m open. I felt like it was a barrier between me and my parents and I was seeing other people who were open with everybody, family included, and they seemed so much more free. I just wanted that for me. (Mariah)
Once I figure something out, I need others to understand that this is part of me, and to hide that from my Mom was the hardest of this probably. (Jo)

Others discussed their associations with Gay Straight Alliance (GSA), Pride, and other campus organizations and said they wanted to share their involvement with their parents.

They know I go to Pride and I have fun, but they don’t know that it’s actually me interacting with my community, which is a different away of thinking about it. So I just decided, I was like, “You know what? I’m just going to tell them so that way they can understand a little bit more why I’m so into it.” (Rosie)

I’m more excited to tell you [dad] of the things that I want to do with my GSA rather than my sexuality, because that really didn’t have anything to do with me. I want to help other people. That’s why I decided to run as a vice president. I mean of course it matters that I’m gay, but I want to share the work that I’m doing with you. (Natalie)

Overall, it seemed that going away to college and becoming more comfortable in their own sexuality was a motivator for the participants to come out to their parents. However, although most of the participants felt close with their parents, they did not know how their parents would respond.

Theme 4: Participant was unsure of how parents would respond to disclosure

Five out of the seven participants reported they did not know how their parents would respond before they disclosed their sexual identity. AJ did not choose to come out on his own, as his sister hinted to his mother that he might be gay. Afterward, he said:

Because our Mom and Dad are very, very, very Orthodox, very old fashioned, we didn’t know what was going to happen. (AJ)

The other participants decided to tell their parents about their sexuality on their own and expressed similar feelings of uncertainty.

You don’t know they are going to react. I didn’t know if they were going to be
upset that I didn’t tell them sooner or upset that I was kind of lying. (Mariah)

Even though I grew up in a super open family, there’s always, I feel like with anyone that comes out to their family, there’s always that … but it’s different when it’s your own kid or your sister, or your son or whatever. (Rosie)

And then my Dad came a few months later, because I wasn’t sure how he was going to react, because I was afraid that I was going to disappoint him. (Jo)

Jo’s fear regarding the possibility of disappointing her father seems to be rooted in anxiety about her father’s potential reaction. Two sub-themes emerged as a result of the participant’s uncertainty. First, similar to Jo’s experience, participants reported feeling anxious before and during their disclosure. Second, because they were nervous about their parent’s response, some came out in unplanned or spontaneous ways.

Sub-theme 4A: Feeling anxious before or during disclosure. All seven participants said they felt anxious before or during their coming out disclosure, including the participants who felt close to their parents and believed their parents were open-minded. Some of the anxiety occurred as the participants contemplated telling their parents about their sexual orientation.

I knew that they were super open, but I was still really scared. I don’t know. They didn’t really have an inkling of a clue so I knew it was definitely going to be a surprise for them. (Mariah)

I remember I was like “Okay my family is super open. I have a gay cousin,” and my sister was one of her bride’s maids, so I knew they wouldn’t care but then there’s always that anxiety ridden little voice that’s like, “What if they do care?” (Rosie)

I guess the nervousness came from the mystery behind “well this could go really, really good or this could go really really bad” and they could maybe not understand and not accept me” (Tom)

My Dad sometimes asks, used to, like, “How come you don’t have a girlfriend. Your cousins have a girlfriend, your brother has a girlfriend, your older brother has a wife. When are you going to get a girlfriend?” Then I always thought, oh my God, one day I’m going to have to tell them. (AJ)
For others, anxiety felt most present during the coming out conversation itself.

Right before I was going to tell him I chickened out, and I told my Mom that I was going to go for a walk at a park and she could tell him, and then I come back. (Jo)

My heart was racing. I remember quite strongly. I felt anxious and wasn’t sure if I wanted to do it, but I just kind of went through with it. (Michael)

Because it’s different when it’s your kid and in your house, so I did panic a little bit. My heart was pumping out of my chest and I was like, “Okay, Okay this is fine. It’s really cool.” (Rosie)

Before I felt...I felt kind of anxious, but because I know my Dad is so open, and liberal, and free thinking, I really didn’t think much of it. I kind of just came out and said it. (Natalie)

Although Rosie and Natalie felt comfortable with their parents, they still admitted to feeling anxious right before coming out to her father. Natalie also seemed to allude that she did not want to make her disclosure too serious as she came out in a spontaneous manner.

Sub-theme 4B: Disclosure was unplanned or spontaneous. Six of the seven participants revealed that the disclosure to their parents was unplanned or spontaneous. Some of the participants made the disclosures casually.

I went home that weekend and I was like “Hey,” and I just showed them a picture. It was like, there was filter at Pride on Snapchat and it says “When you’re out and you’re proud” and I just showed them a picture with that filter on me. (Rosie)

I don’t even know if when I called I had intended to come out, but we had discussed about Christmas plans, and I had to go home. They weren’t going to come into the city, and so we got to talking and I think we actually exchanged some jokes or something. I might have hinted before at my orientation, but I think my mum picked up on those hints and she acknowledged it, and I ended up coming out over the phone. (Michael)

I remember it was about 11:00 at night and when I told them, initially I don’t think it went as well as I thought because they were very shocked because I said it out of nowhere. (Tom)
Natalie, who decided to come out to her father after she became the Vice President of her Gay Straight Alliance on campus, also made the disclosure casually.

“I got it, and I was super excited, and I’m like “Oh crap. Why am I the vice president of GSA if I’m straight? Wait, I’m not,” so I decided to tell my Dad. “Hey Dad this is what’s up. Um, I’m the vice president of GSA, and I’m also gay.”” (Natalie)

AJ and Jo said their disclosures were also unplanned as their mothers brought up their child’s sexuality.

I think I said something like, “I think everyone’s main goal should be to be happy in life,” and she said, “I agree, and I want all my children to be happy, especially you because you have those homosexual tendencies, and I know that the world doesn’t take that every well.” I said, “Oh? How do you know about this?” (AJ)

She’s like, “The only thing I might have a hard time adjusting to is if you were gay.” And I just started crying, and she was like, “Oh my God, are you gay?” I was like, “I don’t think I’m straight,” and she was like, “I take it back. I don’t mean it. I don’t mean it. I love you so much.” We just laughed and I cried. It was all good, and she’s been one of my greatest champions through all this. (Jo)

Although Jo’s mother seemed surprised, she was also quick to offer her love and support. As the participants continued to share their coming out stories, several themes emerged related to how their parents offered support.

Theme 5: Parents assured continued love and acceptance during and after disclosure

All the participants reported that their parents reassured them that they still loved and accepted them, regardless of who they loved.

They were silent for a second and then my Dad said, “Okay, we don’t really care. Whomever you want to date is who you want to date. That doesn’t change the way we feel about you. That doesn’t change the way we think about you. You’re still our daughter, we still love you. Everything is the same. You don’t have to hide from us anymore.” It was really awesome. (Mariah)
They’re like, “But this is what you really need to do, and we’re fully supportive of who you are and don’t let anybody tell you what you’re doing is wrong. You’re perfect the way you are.” (Rosie)

They acknowledged that they aren’t going to treat me any differently. They acknowledged that this isn’t a choice. They acknowledged that they still love me and they’re always there for me. (Tom)

I did have a loving and supportive home that I could always turn to and cry to, which was always very supportive and didn’t seek for me to change even when I came up against obstacles because of my sexuality. (Michael)

Other participants added they wanted their child to find happiness and nothing in their relationship would change.

He said that, “Your sexuality doesn’t matter to me. What matters is that you find someone that makes you happy, and that you find happiness within yourself.” (Natalie)

I said to them I was worried that they’d disown me and they had told me they’d never do that and they still loved me. And they assured that even though I felt alienated that they weren’t ever going to make me feel alienated. (Tom)

She said the obvious motherly thing, like, “I love you no matter what. I wish you wouldn’t be gay, but I understand this is something I can’t change, and I really just want you to be happy and I want you to be safe, and that’s why I think you should keep it a secret.” (AJ)

A few participants also shared their parents continued to express unconditional love and support even after the disclosure.

My mother always says that she prays for me, and it’s great to know she doesn’t pray anymore for me to not be gay. She prays for me to be happy which I think is really nice and lovely. (AJ)

They would send me little text messages like, “We love you, we’re here for you. We hope you’re happy.” All this stuff. Them being there, even though they weren’t always physically with me…them saying they were with me on the phone, over a text, it made me feel like I had some support. (Mariah)
Overall, parental expressions of love seemed to provide the participants with a sense of support. Beyond communicating love and acceptance, the participants also felt supported when parents took other steps to affirm their sexual identity.

Theme 6: Parents affirmed LGB identity during and after the disclosure

All of the participants described ways their parents affirmed and normalized their sexual identity during and after the initial coming out disclosure. Some of the participants shared their parents were willing to talk about taboo subjects related to sex and relationships.

I’ve never had “the talk” with my parents but they said if I needed help discovering sex practices they’d be there. (Tom)

I still talk to her very, very often now about literally everything. She asks about my sex life which was a total shock for me, just she did, and I told her and our relationship didn’t change or shift whatsoever when I came out to her. (AJ)

Others said coming out was not a big deal as their parents talk about sexual orientation very casually.

It’s just who you are. They didn’t make a huge deal out of it like, “Oh my gosh, you’re gay.” All this crazy stuff. They were just super cool about it and super low key about it because I don’t a reminder every day of “Oh yeah, Mariah’s gay.” I know, you don’t have to keep telling me. I am happy and I’m proud of it, but it shouldn’t be a big deal. And I think that’s something my parents did really well. They didn’t keep bringing it up. They let it be what it was. (Mariah)

My Mom makes jokes like yesterday I told her, I was like, “Oh, yeah. Remind me to call this guy at noon” and I explained, “Yeah, he’s doing this thing for his dissertation,” so she set the alarm for “Rosie, call because you like girls.” They play it off like its no big deal. (Rosie)

In addition to talking about sexuality informally, other participants added that their parents revealed they had prior awareness of their child’s sexuality.

She was like, “Oh, is this your way of coming out?” I was like, “Oh, okay.” Then my Dad was like, “Oh, I always wondered why you did like girls.” (Rosie)
I’d joined Delta Lambda Phi that year, and I had to tell her what fraternity I was in about half a dozen times, and she never seemed to remember it, so I was surprised when she had remembered it and ended up looking up what the fraternity was all about. Actually it was my Dad that did that for her, so she already knew by the time that I had told her. The coming out was, I guess a formality, more than anything else. (Michael)

We told my Dad, and he just laughed, and he was like, “Well, you joined the Rugby team. I just figured,” and I was like, “That was easy.” (Jo)

My Dad wasn’t surprised, because like I said, back in High School I had a girlfriend, and she was over all the time, and I talked to her all the time. I guess he kind of saw that change in me a little bit from being kind of really secluded to being more open. (Natalie)

I told them I’ve always felt this way and they noticed that I’ve never exactly had any interest in girls and I told them that. They were like, “We’ve noticed that before.” (Tom)

It seemed the participants felt supported and accepted when their parents responded openly and casually. As the participants discussed the relationships with their parents, four sub-themes surfaced that revealed more specific things parents did to affirm their child’s LGB identity.

Sub-theme 6A: Parents asked intentional questions to learn more about their child and LGB community. Although it was not a dominant theme in this analysis, two of the participants shared they appreciated times their parents asked specific questions to further their understanding of their child and the LGBTQQIA community. AJ recalled a meaningful conversation with his mother.

We had not spoken about it yet since we had spoken about it on the phone, and we had already been in the same house for a week, so one night I go out to walk the dog, and she comes out with me. This is a big deal because my mother has really bad legs. They hurt her all the time. She offered to come walk the dog with me, so I knew that this was going to be huge. (AJ)

AJ said that during the walk, his mother asked him questions about how long he had known he was gay, what it was like to be attracted to other men, what “type” of men he
liked, how sex works, what gay clubs, drag shows, and pride festivals are like, and how he lives his life as a gay man. AJ said he was thankful for his mother for asking him questions.

I just felt so comfortable explaining it to her because I could tell that she was genuinely curious and not just trying to find a weak spot in an argument that I was trying to make or trying to disagree with me. She just genuinely wanted to know. (AJ)

Tom also shared that his parents asked intentional questions to further their understanding of his experience.

I really enjoyed when they asked questions because I know they’re not exactly exposed to this and they’d never met anyone like this so when they asked questions it made me realize that they wanted to understand and as I answered their questions I could tell that they were warming up to it a little bit more and they weren’t exactly against the idea. (Tom)

Both AJ and Tom recognized their parents did not have prior experience with the LGBTQIA community and felt supported as their parents sought to understand their experience.

Sub-theme 6B: Parents were welcoming toward their child’s potential partners. Some of the participants (n = 5) said they felt like their parents were accepting and welcoming toward their potential partners.

And I am dating somebody. “Our door is always open for whoever you’re dating.” Anytime my girlfriend comes over, they give her a huge hug and they ask her how she’s doing. It just makes me feel like they really care about how I feel and my emotions toward the situation. (Mariah)

We went out to tea once and my family was like, “Oh, okay. Well,” they were talking about weddings and they’re like, “Okay Rosie, now we have to make sure that your wife is dressed somewhat matching you.” (Rosie)

I brought my first boyfriend home for Christmas last year. The relationship didn’t last, but certainly he was welcomed with open arms by the family who was there at Christmastime. (Michael)
When they met my ex-girlfriend for the first time they didn’t act like anything was different, and they picked on me just like they pick on my brothers and their girlfriends and things like that, and just how normal they made everything was, also, a surprise to me. (Jo)

The participants seemed to feel supported as their parents normalized their sexuality by having conversations about partners and inviting them as members of the family.

Sub-theme 6C: Parents encouraged their child regarding experiences of fear and discrimination. Five of the participants shared examples of feeling supported when their parents encouraged them through experiences of fear related to their sexuality and discrimination.

I came out before the Pulse shooting happened. My family had just moved to Orlando. I remember them calling me and they were panicking. They were like, “Did you know anybody there?” (Rosie)

Some of the participants shared that their parents were willing to stand up for them to other family members.

They were always telling me, “We’re here for you if you anything happens. We’ll always be by your side. We don’t care what anyone else in the family thinks or says. We have you.” Them being emotionally there for me regardless of what other people in my family might think or say really meant a lot to me. (Mariah)

She [Grandmother] cancelled Christmas because her heart couldn’t handle me being gay, and my Dad totally stuck up for me, and I just was expecting him to let his mother just walk all over him, and he didn’t. He was totally my representative and it felt really nice that he stood up for me. (Jo)

Others felt encouraged during experiences of blatant discrimination. AJ and Michael shared experiences of being discriminated against in their places of employment.

Of course the first thing I did was call my mother, and she was just extremely supportive, and she tried to empathize as much as she could. She has a small business and she has always been like, “My workers are like family to me. I can’t believe he did that to you. You are better than this. You don’t need him. He is totally mistaken.” (AJ)
We considered taking legal action. I filed a complaint with the [organizational department], which oversaw the organization for discrimination on who I was, both my relationship to my father and my sexuality. My parents supported me through that. (Michael)

Sub-theme 6D: Parents performed acts of service that promoted child's expression of LGB identity. Three participants described times their parents went beyond encouragement, and physically did something for them that affirmed their unconditional support for their sexual identity.

I was leading the chapter of my fraternity DLP (ΔΛΦ) in the actual celebrating that year was that was 2013. I didn’t have enough money on my own to take the round trip, so my Dad got me a train ticket and then a bus ticket. They knew it was for Pride, so I guess I would consider that fairly supportive, proof that they were fairly supportive. (Michael)

And my Dad was just like, “We have our family, and we don’t need to bring our children into somewhere that they’re going to feel judged.” And so on some level he stepped away from his family or his mother, to support his family, and that’s something I didn’t ever see him doing. (Jo)

All those social issues are important. I feel like my Dad and I canvassing and building that connection through that made it stronger, if that makes sense. We really built a connection, and we even became closer realizing that we had almost identical political views without even discussing it. (Natalie)

Natalie experienced a sense of newfound sense of closeness with her father after coming out to him. This experience seemed common with other participants as well as many described having more relational depth with their parents after learning their sexual identity.

Theme 7: Participant experienced increased relational depth with parents after coming out

After coming out, most of the participants (n = 6) described feeling closer to their parents. They believed they could be more open and honest with their parents and noticed their parents also were more open with them as well.
After I felt more free, and I felt like our relationship was closer because I shared such an intimate detail of my life. (Natalie)

It felt nice to stop hiding things from her, because I was also going through a little mini heartbreak breakup thing, and my Mom would be the person that I would have told about it. In my mind, I couldn’t tell her about it, because she didn’t know I was gay yet. It was like opening up our normal relationship to come back into play. (Jo)

The little things now that they point out that they would’ve said to me about guys before they knew. They do it with girls. It’s not like a weird thing that they’re stepping on eggshells. It’s just like, “Oh, have you met any new girls lately?” (Rosie)

I spoke to her about this boy that had cheated on me. She was just there. She was just like, “Don’t worry about it. He has no idea what he’s missing. You are such a good person. You’re handsome.” (AJ)

Others also expressed a sense of relief that they could finally be themselves with their parents.

He’s always been the person that I looked up to, and I was like, “I know I’m not a disappointment, but if he thinks I’m a disappointment,” so it was a huge relief when he just went about his day like me telling him I was gay wasn’t even a big deal. (Jo)

When we got home again, I just went to my room and I just wanted to cry of happiness. I was so happy. I felt like literally there were no secrets. Me and my Mom were the same person and we were on the same page. (AJ)

I felt so relieved. It was just nice to be able to talk about whatever I wanted to talk about. Fully being me. I don’t even know else to say it. It’s just who I am! (Mariah)

As the participants described feeling closer to their parents, they also seemed to notice themselves feeling more whole and authentic in other settings as well.

Theme 8: Participants experienced increased sense of authenticity after coming out to parents

Five of the participants shared after they came out to their parents, they felt more authentic with themselves and in contexts outside of the family system.
Having that support from my family was really important because not it just makes it easier to be me around other people because I’m like, “Well, whatever you say, I know that my family backs me 100%” (Rosie)

Michael and AJ added they felt more confident after they came out to their parents.

Because of being gay, because of being a smaller stature, not always athletic as I am now, I always dealt with kind of an inferiority complex. Certainly the support from my parents helped that. (Michael)

I feel stronger as a person. My personality has evolved a lot. I used to be extremely shy and reserved because of course, there was something reserved and to be shy about. I don’t know. I feel like I’m a pretty open person, and I try to be as honest as possible can. (AJ)

Others said they felt more connected to their own identity as a member of the LGBTQIA community.

I feel like it made me more accepting of myself and it made me more able to tell people. Now, I don’t care if someone asks me. I’ll say, “Yeah I’m gay. I have a girlfriend.” Whatever. But before I was out to my parents, I would hide it.” (Mariah)

After I came out and then with things like the Pulse shooting like after I came out I remember just being, I was able to be upset and people could understand why because some people are like, “Why are you getting so into it and so upset when it doesn’t pertain to you?” (Rosie)

I’m becoming a free-thinking and like a free-moving, and I guess I’m just becoming an independent person of myself. (Natalie)

Theme 9: Appreciation of family’s response and overall support

All of the participants shared they felt grateful for how their parents responded during the coming out disclosure, and for their families as a whole. AJ, Jo, and Tom shared positive feelings as they reflected that they were thankful for their parents

I still feel extremely appreciated because I know that they could pray to end world hunger but instead, they are praying for me to just be happy, and I really don’t think there’s anything a son could ever ask for other than to just have their parents want them to be happy. (AJ)
It was really nice I guess. It made me cry. I might cry right now. It was very surprising, because I was definitely expecting a bad reaction. (Jo)

Overall, it went fairly well and I’m not really sure how else I could have done it differently besides at a different time. Overall I felt supported and I felt loved and I was happy that they were there for me. (Tom)

Rosie and Natalie said the coming out process reaffirmed the overall importance of family in their lives.

I was like, “It doesn’t matter what any of my friends or peers think of me, because my family is the most important,” so it’s like, “I knew I would’ve had your support and that should’ve mattered most,” because I know that they’ll always support me and they’ll be the ones that’ll always be there for me no matter what. (Rosie)

It’s everything, honestly, because at the end of the day if something goes wrong, I know that I have at least one person in this world that I can turn to and who will support me regardless of anything that I do. It’s honestly, it’s everything that I have someone who is supportive. (Natalie)

AJ, Michael, and Jo also commented they were grateful for their experience because they were aware that others do not have supportive parents.

Oh my God, I am so lucky. I am so frickin’ lucky No one caught me when I was in Panama doing anything. No one caught me when I was in New York, and when I did come out, I was received. I wasn’t pushed away. I’ve seen what happens to the kids that get kicked out, and I’ve seen what happens to the people that get disowned by their family. (AJ)

I think I’m fortunate, and certainly some my experiences could be a little bit different then some of my fraternity brothers in the state. (Michael)

I never realized how lucky I am, because some of my friends when they were teenagers, they were kicked out of their houses. I just feel like my coming out experience, I feel so lucky to have the experience that I have, to have two supportive parents, and friends that just have always supported me I guess. (Jo)

Finally, several participants shared they were glad they waited until college to come out to their parents and would not have come out any other way.

Just looking back, I don’t think I would have changed anything that I did in terms of the coming out process to my parents. I think everything happened in its due time and I couldn’t have just .. Given the nature of growing up in a small town
have come out any earlier before I had the experiences that I’d had in college. (Michael)

When I think back on it, it makes me really happy about how everything went down, how I went about it. I actually am happy that I waited until college to come out because I really don’t think I was ready in High School. I don’t know. I am just really happy about how everything went down. There is nothing that I would take back and nothing I regret about what happened. (Mariah)

Everyone in my life has been super supportive and super loving, so I’m very happy that I came out, and other than telling my parents at the same time, I don’t have any regrets from it. (Jo)

I wouldn’t do it any other way honestly. I feel like the way I came out was so important, and it was so necessary, because I wanted to share the work that I’m doing. (Natalie)

Overall, it appeared as though the participants were impacted by parental support before, during, and after their disclosure in several faucets of their lives. Furthermore, the process of attending college seemed very influential throughout these narratives as it served as the catalyst for the participants to come out to their parents.

Summary

The seven participants in this study shared their experiences of coming out to their parents as lesbian or gay during college. They shared how they felt before, during, and after their disclosure, and how they made meaning of their overall experience. In this chapter, I provided an overall of the participant’s demographics, experiences, beliefs and potential biases of the research team, and an overview of nine themes and 13 sub-themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews. In the following chapter, I will provide a discussion of how the results are related to previous research, potential clinical implications for clinical practice, limitations, and opportunities for future research.
APPENDIX E

EXTENDED DISCUSSION
Many young adults explore sexuality and come out in college (Anders et al., 2016). Coming out is a significant process in the sexual identity development of LGB individuals (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008). A central task in the coming out process includes disclosing sexual identity to parents (Ryan et al., 2015). The majority of literature has focused on the influence of stigma, discrimination, and rejection on the well-being and adjustment of LGB individuals (Almeida et al., 2009, Bouris et al., 2010, D’Augelli et al., 1998, Rosario et al., 2002). Although some authors have examined the benefits of parental support (Elizur & Ziv, 2001, Feinstein et al., 2014, Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001), there is a gap in the literature that describes the experiences of people who have felt supported by their parents throughout the coming out process.

To address this gap, I designed a qualitative study that explored the lived experiences of LGB college students who came out in college and felt supported by their parents. The participants were all current college students who moved away from home to attend college, disclosed to their parents they identified as lesbian or gay, and experienced sexuality related support. I conducted semi-structured interviews with seven participants and analyzed the data using an adapted version of a classic data analysis process (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

Nine themes and thirteen sub-themes emerged from the data analysis. Prior to coming out, the participants shared two themes (awareness of feeling different, positive relationship with parents prior to coming out) and four sub-themes (compelled to keep sexuality hidden from others, fear of persecution due to religion, culture, or environment). During college, the participants shared one major theme (college experience impacted the coming out process) and three sub-themes (experienced
newfound freedom and autonomy, normalization of LGBTQIA culture, and desire to be fully known by parents). With regard to the coming out disclosure itself, the participants shared three themes (participant was unsure of how parents would respond to coming out disclosure, parents assured continued love and acceptance during and after disclosure, and parents affirmed LGB identity during and after disclosure) and six sub-themes (feeling anxious before and during coming out disclosure, disclosure was unplanned or spontaneous, parents asked intentional questions to learn more about their child and the LGB community, parents were welcoming toward their child’s potential partners, parents encouraged their child regarding experiences of fear or discrimination, parents performed acts of service that promoted child’s expression of LGB identity). In the time following their coming out disclosure, the participants shared three themes (increased relational depth with parents after coming out, increased sense of authenticity after coming out to parents, and appreciation for family’s response and overall support).

In this chapter, I will share implications from this study. First, I will discuss how the results reflect the existing literature related to the coming out process. I will also discuss potential implications for mental health professionals who serve the LGB population, and ideas for future research. Finally, I will conclude this chapter with limitations of this study.

Results and Existing Literature

The results of this study can be linked to existing research related to the coming out process. The findings connect to current literature that pertains to the experiences
prior to coming out, coming out in college, coming out to parents, and the effects of parental support.

Before Coming Out

Throughout the study, all of the participants shared experiences related to their coming out process before they came out to their parents. The participants described times they were aware they were different from their peers, were compelled to keep sexuality hidden from others, and felt fearful of possible persecution due to their religion or environment. However, they also shared they had positive relationships with their parents before coming out to them.

The participants each shared times in their lives they were conscious that they were different from their peers. These experiences seem to reflect early stages described by sexual identity models which describe how individuals become aware they identify as gay and compare themselves to others (Cass, 1979; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Troiden, 1989). Some of the participants mentioned these experiences were initially distressing due to a lack of visibility of other LGBTQIA individuals in their communities. For example, Rosie mentioned she only knew of one person at her high school that had come out, and Natalie described one year of high school as a blur because she felt so isolated from her peers. The negative experiences expressed by the participants seem to reflect the current literature that argues LGB young adults experience more stress, depression, and anxiety than their peers (Cochran et al., 2003; King et al., 2008; Prezedworski et al., 2015) and feel alienated due to the hetero-normativity of the world (Perrin-Wallqvist & Lindblom, 2015).
The participants also shared they had a period of time when they denied their sexuality to themselves and kept their identity hidden from others. Rosie mentioned that being in the closet affected many faucets of her life whereas Tom shared he tried to convince himself that he was not gay throughout high school. Mohr and Kendra (2011) also argued individuals experience internalized homo-negativity and concealment motivation throughout their coming out process, and assessed this process with the LGIS scale. Some of the participants chose to keep their identity a secret because they did not know how people would respond to their sexuality as they feared persecution. For example, AJ shared he used to think he was going to hell for being gay, and Michael talked about concealing his sexuality because he was teased at school. These findings support previous research that suggests LGBT individuals who perceive potential risks in their environment might fear victimization and live less authentic lives (Evans & Broido, 1999; Schope, 2002).

Regardless of their struggles, all of the participants shared they had positive relationships with their parents before they moved away to attend college. Most of the students indicated they had very close relationships with their parents, and felt supported throughout their entire lives. Given all of the participants would later feel supported by their parents, this theme connects to previous literature that found individuals from cohesive families perceive less negative reactions to coming out disclosures than individuals from disconnected families (Willoughby et al., 2006).

Additionally, most of the participants shared their parents had previously been open-minded and liberal. For example, Mariah shared her parents had friends from the LGBT community, and Rosie disclosed her parents supported her during a “Goth
phase.” Similarly, earlier research found parents with high degrees of cognitive flexibility were supportive of their child’s coming out process (Goodrich & Gilbride, 2010) whereas parents who expressed high degrees of political conservatism and religious involvement were less accepting of their child’s sexual orientation (Baiocco et al., 2015).

Although the participants each described positive relationships with their parents prior to coming out, they all waited until they went away to college to disclose they identified as lesbian or gay.

Coming Out in College

All of the participants described their college experience as having a significant impact on their coming out process. The students all reported that college helped them feel more comfortable with themselves as a sexual minority. Some also shared they experienced newfound freedom, developed relationships with other members of the LGBTQIA community, and felt an increased desire to come out to their parents.

The participants all described how college impacted their sexual identity development. For example, AJ shared college allowed him to meet and experiment with other gay men for the first time and Rosie said college helped her realize she wanted to date women romantically. These experiences seem to reflect the middle stages of various sexual identity models whereby individuals begin to seek contact with other members of the gay community as they develop more positive views of themselves (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982) and begin to develop a personal and social LGB identity (D’Augelli, 1994).

Most of the participants shared that college provided them with a newfound sense of independence they would not have felt had they still been living with their
parents. For example, Jo described a new openness with having to figure things out on her own without her parent’s guidance. The participant’s importance of freedom seems to support previous research that argued individuals in environments that support one’s autonomy are more comfortable in coming out (Legate et al., 2012). Furthermore, the participant’s narratives also seemed to reflect Stevens’ grounded theory (2004) that claimed individuals feel a sense of empowerment to explore their identity in college because the environment feels safe.

Several of the participants also said college helped normalize LGBTQIA culture as they established friendships, joined student groups, became involved in advocacy projects, and developed romantic relationships. For example, Michael discussed how his involvement with a fraternity for gay men made him more comfortable with his own sexuality. This theme connects with previous research that contended LGB college students develop a sense of belonging at a university through meaningful group members and authentic friendships with other members of the LGBT community (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). The participants also seemed to perceive less environmental risks associated with coming out then they did when they were living at home with their parents (Evans & Broido, 1999).

As the participants became more involved in the gay community and comfortable with their own identity, they also developed a desire to be more fully known by their parents. For example, Natalie desperately wanted to share the work she was doing with her campus GSA group and Rosie wanted her parents to know why she was so passionate about attending Pride. Previous researchers agreed that people choose to come out to their parents to live more honestly and strengthen bonds (Ben-Ari, 1995a).
However, the connection between college students becoming open with their sexual identity through involvement in the LGBTQIA campus groups, and wanting to share their passions with their parents does not appear to be specifically reflected in the literature. Nonetheless, this desire to be known seems to be what inspired the participants to come out to their parents.

Coming Out to Parents

All of the participants shared their experiences as they made the decision to come out to their parents and perceived sexuality-related support. All of the participants said they were unsure of how their parents would respond, but believed their parents expressed unconditional love, and found ways to affirm their LGB identity.

Although they had felt their parents had previously been open-minded and supportive, the participants said they were still unsure of how their parents might react to their disclosure. Most ($n = 6$) of the participants said their coming out disclosure was either spontaneous or unplanned. For example, Rosie shared she came out to her parents by showing them a picture of her with a Pride filter on Snapchat. Manning (2015) had previously described *unplanned* and *emergent* coming out disclosures in his typology. However, the theme related to college students coming out to their parents in spontaneous or casual ways does not seem to be addressed in previous research. Furthermore, the participants shared they still felt anxious right before coming out, and a sense of relief afterward. This finding is consistent with prior research (Perrin-Wallqvist & Herdt, 2015) related to coming out experiences of LGB youth to their parents.

After coming out, all of the participants shared their parents expressed unconditional love and acceptance for them, and a desire for them to be happy. For
example, Mariah said her father assured her that he loved her, nothing would change, and that she did not have to hide from him anymore. The participants also shared how their parents normalized and affirmed their identity by reacting casually to their disclosure, being open to talking about sex and relationships, asking intentional questions to learn more about the LGBTQIA community, welcoming their potential partners, encouraging them during experiences of fear or discrimination, and performing acts of service related to their sexual identity. Some of these themes are somewhat reflected in previous literature pertaining to how parents navigate their own coming out process as they “become” the parent of an LGB child (Boxer et al, 1991; Grafsky, 2014). For example, after coming out to his mother, AJ mentioned she asked him several questions about homosexuality, and expressed concern for his safety and well-being. Her concern seemed to be rooted in her process of adjusting to a new understanding of herself as the mother of a gay son. Although there were some parallels, researchers have not examined how parents support LGB college students throughout the coming out process. Therefore, most of these findings are not reflected in the current base of literature. However, the participants also shared how their lives changed after they came out to their parents, and the themes appeared connected to past literature related to the mental health benefits of support.

After Coming Out

The participants described ways their lives changed after coming out to their parents and perceiving support. They shared they felt they had a closer relationship with their parents, had an overall increased sense of authentic, and an overall appreciation for their coming out process.
The participants reported they noticed their relationship with their parents had more relational depth than before they had come out. They shared they were more open and transparent with their parents and felt more secure in their relationship. For example, Jo shared she felt “free” now that she could tell things to her mother that she couldn’t share before. This finding seems congruent with previous research that found individuals who feel limited in how they can express themselves with someone would also feel disconnected from that person (Ryan et al., 2015).

The participants also said they felt a greater sense of authenticity outside of their family. They shared they felt more confident in themselves as members of the LGBTQIA community, and more comfortable coming out to others. These themes seem to reflect the final stages described in the various sexual identity models whereby individuals integrate their sexuality with other aspects of identity as they develop a healthy self-image (Cass, 1979, Coleman, 1982). For example, Natalie shared coming out to her parents helped her become a more “free-thinking” person, Michael shared his parent’s support helped him get past his inferiority complex, and Rosie said it was easier to be open with others with the knowledge that her parents would always support her. Previous literature suggested LGB children who are supported by their parents develop higher self-esteem (Beauty, 1999) and express more self-confidence (D’Amico et al, 2015). However, previous literature has not yet supported the possibility that individuals who feel supported by their parents will feel more empowered to come out in other contexts.

Finally, all of the participants shared they were appreciative of their overall coming out experience as they were aware others have not had supportive parents.
They reported their parent’s support helped them reaffirm the value of family as they shared they were glad they came out in college and wouldn’t have changed anything about their coming out experience. This affirmation supports previous research that maintains many individuals prefer to wait until college until they come out to college (Rhoads, 1994). However, previous literature has not yet examined the connection between parental support and the overall sense of gratitude for one’s family.

Overall, these themes provide some insight into the experiences of LGB college students who came out to their parents and felt supported throughout their coming out process. The findings of this study can be linked to potential implications for mental health professionals and counseling researchers.

Implications

The results from this study can be applied to different contexts including clinical practice and counseling research. In this section, I propose potential implications from this study.

Clinical Practice

Counselors could consider the results from this study in various clinical contexts including individual therapy with LGB persons, individual therapy with parents of LGB persons, and family therapy with LGB persons and their parents.

The participants who identified as LGB and lived in rural areas throughout High School felt different from their peers isolated. Counselors could help LGB individuals put words to their experience that might be unfamiliar to them to create meaning of their experience (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). They could also provide psycho-educational materials that would help normalize their experience of identifying as LGB.
(Medeiros, Seehaus, Elliott, & Melaney, 2004). School counselors might also consider starting pride organizations within the schools to encourage LGB students to connect with each other (Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, Laub, 2009).

The participants in this study reported having previous supportive relationships with their parents as well as a support system on campus. As they became more involved on campus, they felt an increased desire to be fully known by their parents. Counselors who work with LGB college students and encounter clients with similar backgrounds might help their clients brainstorm coming out strategies using reflective questioning or role-plays. However, the participants in this study also reported feeling anxious about coming out to their parents. Counselors might also provide opportunities for clients to process this anxiety to determine if they are truly ready to disclose their sexuality to their parents (LaSala, 2000). Counselors who work with LGB college students should also be mindful that clients present with different experiences and backgrounds (Israel, Gorcheva, Walther, Sulzner, & Cohen 2008). It might not be in the client’s best interest to come out to their parents if they do not have a support system on campus, or if they have not previously felt supported by their parents (D’Augelli et al, 1998). Counselors should help clients navigate this decision-making process.

Counselors who are working with parents of LGB college students might also find the results of this study helpful. One finding from this study revealed the importance of a parent reassuring their child of their unconditional love and support. If a client is struggling with accepting their child’s sexuality, a counselor might help the client integrate their newfound knowledge of their child’s sexuality with the love they have for their child (Saltzburg, 2004). A counselor could also help the client brainstorm ways to
communicate the love they have for their child regardless of how they feel about their child’s sexuality.

Another finding revealed several ways the participants felt like their parents normalized their sexuality. Counselors working with parents of LGB college students who want to be more supportive might consider helping them strategize ways that affirm their child’s sexuality (Ryan et al, 2010). For example, some of the participants shared their parents were willing to have open discussions about sex and relationships. Counselors might facilitate role-plays with parents who are unsure how to facilitate these conversations (Burgess, Dziegielewski, & Green, 2005). Other participants shared examples of how their parents were welcoming toward their partners. Counselors could help parents readjust the expectations they had for their child’s prospective partners (Saltzburg, 2007), and develop ways they could communicate a welcoming nature toward their child’s partner. Participants also felt supported when their parents were encouraging through difficult experiences related to their sexuality. Counselors might help parents process their own feelings related to their child’s challenges while helping simultaneously helping them think of ways direct and indirect ways to offer support.

Finally, the results from this study might also be helpful for family therapists who are working with LGB college students and their parents. Some of the participants shared they appreciated when their parents asked them specific questions because they wanted to learn more about their child, their coming out process, and the gay community. Family counselors could facilitate conversations where parents ask questions they have about their child’s sexuality, and the LGB individual has an opportunity to teach their parent about themselves and LGBTQIA culture. Also, the
participants shared they experienced increased relational depth with their parents after they came out to them. Family therapists could facilitate activities in session that creates opportunities for both parties to share their experiences with each other while developing a sense of trust (LaSala, 2000).

Research Implications

This study provides insight into the lived experiences of LGB college students who perceived sexuality-related support from their parents throughout their coming out process. There are several opportunities that future research could expand on the results of this analysis.

The sample of this study was designed to include individuals who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Unfortunately, none of the participants in the sample identified as bisexual. Furthermore, individuals who identified as asexual, pansexual, questioning, or transgender were not included in this study. Future researchers might replicate this study to examine the lived experiences of other sexual or gender minorities who came out to their parents and perceived support. Furthermore, researchers could conduct this study with samples that include only gay men or only lesbian women and examine whether perceived support is experienced differently between genders. Another qualitative study could include interviews with both the LGB individuals and their parents to further assess strategies parents use to support their children throughout their coming out process. Finally, researchers could also conduct a longitudinal study that examines perceived parental support over time.

Another finding suggested that individuals came out to their parents in ways that were spontaneous or unplanned. Although the participants shared they wanted to be
fully known, their motivations for coming out in a spontaneous manner are unclear. For example, did the individuals in this study come out spontaneously because deep down they expected their parents to be supportive? Furthermore, if LGB individuals think their parents could reject them, will they have a more planned or rehearsed method of coming out? Future researchers could examine how LGB individuals select the manner by which they come out to their parents, and if their strategy is related to an expected outcome.

The participants also shared that after coming out to their parents, they felt an increased sense of authenticity in their lives beyond their family system. Individuals expressed more confidence, a sense of relief, and willingness to come out in other contexts. However, did the participants feel this way because their parents supported them? Or, did they feel this way because they had completed a difficult milestone in their coming out experience? Future researchers could examine the relationships between coming out to parents, perceiving parental support, and feeling more authentic.

The participants also shared several ways their parents expressed their unconditional love and affirmed the participant’s lesbian or gay identity. Researchers could conduct a quantitative study to determine the extent to which various parental support behaviors impact the participant’s sexual identity development and overall well-being.

The suggested studies could provide counselors and researchers with a richer understanding of how parents provide sexuality related support for their children throughout the coming out process. In the following section, I will discuss the limitations of this study.
Limitations

Despite my efforts to ensure rigor and trustworthiness, this study had several limitations. First, I made a concentrated effort to recruit participants who were diverse in terms of gender, race, sexuality, and geographical location. Although the sample was diverse in terms of gender, race, and geographical location, there were no bisexual participants in the sample. Therefore, the results from this study may not be applicable to bisexual individuals.

As I conducted interviews, I incorporated Seidman’s (2006) structure of asking questions related to life history, present-day experiences, and meaning-making strategies. Although Seidman suggested researchers conduct three separate interviews, he also said researchers could modify his structure based on the nature of the study. In the end, I only conducted one interview with each participant. Additionally, all interviews were conducted via Skype and were not face-to-face. However, all of the interviews seemed to reveal narratives that described how the participants experienced support from their parents. During the interviews, I asked follow-up questions and sensed each participant provided depth related to their experience. Still, it is possible with face-to-face interviews or additional follow-up interviews that more depth could have been found.

Finally, the research team was not free from biases. Myself and another member of the team identified as gay and have had personal experiences related to coming out to our parents. The other members of the team also reported personal experiences and biases related to this topic. The research team took intentional steps to limit our biases including keeping a reflexive journal, engaging in epoche, and bracketing our biases.
Additionally, I performed participant member checks, and the participants said the themes adequately described their experiences. Nevertheless, it is possible our personal biases still influenced the results of this study.

Conclusion

In current literature, researchers suggested parental support promotes self-esteem and well-being of LGB individuals (Feinstein et al, 2014; Ryan et al., 2010). However, there is a significant gap in the literature pertaining to the nature of sexuality-related support. This phenomenological analysis sought to fill that gap by understanding the lived experiences of lesbian and gay college students who came out to their parents and felt supported during their coming out process.

The seven college students who participated in this study provided narratives describing their experiences identifying as lesbian or gay, going away to college, coming out to their parents, and perceiving sexuality related parental support. The participants began their journey by feeling isolated and different from their peers. In college, they became more comfortable within their sexuality and wanted to be more fully known by their parents. As they came out, the participants shared many stories related to how their parents expressed their unconditional love while affirming their sexual identity. As a result, the participants became closer with their parents, more authentic in their lives, and grateful for their experiences.

This study has several limitations and should not be generalized for all LGB college students. However, this study provides insights related to how some lesbian and gay college students experience the coming out process when they perceive on-going support from their parents.
APPENDIX F

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS
Before agreeing to participate in this research study, it is important that you read and understand the following explanation of the purpose, benefits and risks of the study and how it will be conducted.

**Title of Study:** Coming out: The lived experiences of LGB college students who feel supported by parents

**Student Investigator:** Eric Price, University of North Texas (UNT) Department of Counseling and Higher Education.

**Supervising Investigator:** Dr. Elizabeth Prosek

**Purpose of Study:** You are being asked to participate in a research study that involves sharing your experiences coming out of the closet to your parents.

**Study Procedures:** First, you will be asked to complete a brief questionnaire regarding your personal characteristics, enrollment in college, and if you have disclosed your sexual identity to your parents. This survey will take approximately 10 minutes. Based on responses to the questions, you may be invited to participate in a 45-60 minute individual interview. This interview can take place face-to-face if you live within a 90-mile radius of Denton, Texas or via electronic communication (i.e. Skype) if you live outside this distance. After the initial interview, you could be contacted with follow up questions or prompts by which you verify the accuracy of our findings. The estimated length of time for any follow up questions is approximately 20 minutes.

**Foreseeable Risks:** Participation in this study poses a risk for potential breach of confidentiality. To minimize this risk, I will not use your actual name or any other identifying information on the records, publications, or presentations related to this study. Furthermore, I will take caution to ensure your personal information is kept private. It is possible that participation could create mild to moderate discomfort as you share experiences with me that could be considered private. You have the freedom to decide how much you would like to share and you may choose to discontinue involvement with the study at any time. No other foreseeable risks are related to your involvement in this study.

**Benefits to the Subjects or Others:** I believe you will have an opportunity to reflect on your coming out experience in a meaningful way, however you might not directly benefit from participating in this study. Results of the study may help counselors understand how lesbian, gay, and bisexual college students experience support from their parents throughout their coming out process. Counselors can use this information to develop interventions that will help future parents support their sons and daughters who choose to come to them in college.
Compensation for Participation: Participants who are chosen for this study and participate in the interview will be entered into a drawing for a $100 gift card to their campus bookstore.

Procedures for Maintaining Confidentiality of Research Records: Interested participants will complete a demographic survey online thru Qualtrics. Your participation in this online survey involves risks to confidentiality similar to an individual’s everyday use of the Internet. I will download this information and keep it on a password protected USB drive. Once I select final participants, interviews will take place via face-to-face interviews or through electronic mediums (i.e. Skype). I will audio record all interviews and keep them locked in a HIPAA compliant file. The audio recordings will be de-identified, assigned a number, and given a pseudonym selected by the participant. All recordings will be sent to a professional transcriptionist and analyzed by a four-person research team. Furthermore, the recordings will be stored on a separate password protected flash drive, in a different location from where the demographic information is saved. After completing data analysis, I will destroy the original recordings. Finally, the confidentiality of your identifying information will be maintained in any publications or presentations related to this study.

Questions About this Study: If you have any questions pertaining to this study, you may contact Eric Price at Eric.Price@unt.edu or Dr. Elizabeth Prosek at Elizabeth.Prosek@unt.edu.

Review for Protection of Participants: This research study has been reviewed and approved by the UNT Institutional Review Board (IRB). The UNT IRB can be contacted at (940) 565-4643 with any questions regarding the rights of research subjects.

Research Participants’ Rights:
Your participation in the demographic survey confirms that you have read all of the above and that you confirm all of the following:

- Eric Price or Dr. Elizabeth Prosek has explained the study to you and you have had an opportunity to contact him with any questions about the study. You have been informed of the possible benefits and the potential risks of the study.
- You understand that you do not have to take part in this study, and your refusal to participate or your decision to withdraw will involve no penalty or loss of rights or benefits. The study personnel may choose to stop your participation at any time.
- You understand why the study is being conducted and how it will be performed.
- You understand your rights as a research participant and you voluntarily consent to participate in this study.
- You understand you may print a copy of this form for your records.
Initial Screening Questionnaire

Thank you for responding to the invitation to participate in Coming Out: The Lived Experiences of LGB College Students Who Feel Supported by Their Parents. The following questions are related to your relationship with your parents relative to your coming out experiences. Please answer the questions to the best of your ability. I will utilize your responses to help select participants for my study.

First Name:
What is your gender?
What is your age?
What is your ethnicity?
In which city and state do you currently live?
How would you describe your religion/spirituality when you were growing up?
How would you describe your religion/spirituality today?
How would you describe the religion/spirituality of your parents today?
Are you presently enrolled in an undergraduate program at a four year college or university?
Do you identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual?
At what age did you first internally acknowledge that identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual?
Have you disclosed your sexual identity to at least one parent?
Did you come out to at least one parent while you were attending college?
Were you living at a different physical address than your parent when you came out to them?
At what age did you disclose to your parent that you identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual?
Was at least one of your parent(s) supportive of you when you told them you identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual?
Which parent was supportive during your coming out process?

Please provide your phone number.
Please provide your Email address.
Please select a pseudonym for the duration of this study.

Thank you for your interest in this study. If you qualify for participant, Eric will contact you within 48 hours to discuss next steps for participation in this study.
**Interview Protocol**

1. Describe your internal coming out process. What was it like for you when you first realized you identified as LGB?

2. What was your relationship like with your parents before you decided to come out to them as LGB?

3. What influenced your decision to tell your parents you identified as LGB?

4. How did you feel when you were coming out to your parents?
   a. How did they initially respond to your disclosure?

5. What specifically did your parents do physically, emotionally, or spiritually that led to you feeling supported by them?
   a. Did your parents do anything else related specifically to your sexuality that led to you feeling supported?

6. How, if at all, did being in college impact your experience with coming out to your parents?

7. Given your overall thoughts and feelings surrounding your experiences coming out to your parents, how do you reflect on that experience today?

8. Is there anything related to your coming out story with your parents that we have not yet discussed?
Recruitment Letter to Potential Participants

Greetings,

My name is Eric Price and I am a doctoral candidate in the Counseling Program at the University of North Texas. As a gay man specializing in counseling LGBTQQIA college students, I am interested in researching positive coming out experiences. Unfortunately, many college students in the community continue to experience rejection and stigma after coming out to their parents. In this particular study, I am investigating the experiences of LGB individuals who disclosed their sexual identity to a parent during college and felt supported by that parent throughout the coming out process. I hope to use my findings to help parents who would like to be more supportive throughout the coming out process, but might not know HOW to offer support. Furthermore, with your help, I would like to find new ways that counselors and educators might work with parents to formulate new strategies of support.

Your participation will consist of taking an online demographic survey that may take approximately 10 minutes. All surveys are completely confidential and your IP address will not be collected. In order to participate, you must meet the following criteria:

1. You are between the ages of 18-24 and currently enrolled in an undergraduate program at a four year college or university.
2. You identity as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.
3. You disclosed your sexual orientation to at least one parent during college and felt supported by that parent after your disclosure.
4. You were not living at home at the time of your disclosure.

After completing the survey, I may contact you to participate in a 45-60 minute interview. Finally, participants who are selected for the interview will also be asked follow-up questions to verify the accuracy of our findings. The estimated length of time for the follow up questions is approximately 20 minutes. As an incentive for your participation, participants will be entered into a drawing for a $100 gift card to their campus bookstore.

This study was approved by the UNT IRB <####>. Please click on the following link if you would like to participate:
<Insert Link to Qualtrics Survey>

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Warmly,

Eric Price, MA, LPC-Intern
Recruitment Letter to LGBT Campus Organizations

Greetings,

My name is Eric Price and I am a doctoral candidate in the Counseling Program at the University of North Texas. As a gay man specializing in counseling LGBTQIA college students, I am interested in researching positive coming out experiences. Unfortunately, many college students in the community continue to experience rejection and stigma after coming out to their parents. In this particular study, I am investigating the experiences of LGB individuals who disclosed their sexual identity to a parent during college and felt supported by that parent throughout the coming out process. I hope to use my findings to help parents who would like to be more supportive throughout the coming out process, but might not know HOW to offer support.

I humbly request that you forward the attached letter to potential participants within (*insert name of group*). With your help, I believe this study will find new ways for counselors and educators to partner with parents as they create new strategies to support their LGB sons and daughters.

This study was approved by the UNT IRB <####>. Thank you so much for your time.

Warmly,

Eric Price, MA, LPC-Intern
Hello everyone! As most of you know, I am currently a doctoral candidate in the Counseling Program at the University of North Texas. I really need YOUR help in finding participations for my dissertation study. Please read the information below, and forward this ad to any friends, family, or colleagues that you think could provide insight into this study. Feel free to email me at Eric.Price@unt.edu or message me with any questions.

As a gay man specializing in counseling LGBTQQIA college students, I am interested in researching positive coming out experiences. Unfortunately, many college students in our community continue to experience rejection and stigma after coming out to their parents. In this particular study, I am investigating the experiences of LGB individuals who disclosed their sexual identity to a parent during college and felt supported by that parent throughout the coming out process. I hope to use my findings to help parents who would like to be more supportive throughout the coming out process, but might not know HOW to offer support. Furthermore, with your help, I would like to find new ways that counselors and educators might work with parents to formulate new strategies of support.

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1. You are between the ages of 18-24 and currently enrolled in an undergraduate program at a four year college or university.
2. You identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.
3. You disclosed your sexual orientation to at least one parent during college and felt supported by that parent after your disclosure.
4. You were not living at home at the time of your disclosure.

After completing the survey, I may contact you to participate in a 45-60 minute interview. Finally, participants who are selected for the interview will also be asked follow-up questions to verify the accuracy of our findings. The estimated length of time for the follow-up questions is approximately 20 minutes. As an incentive for your participation, participants will be entered into a drawing for a $100 gift card to their campus bookstore. This study was approved by the UNT IRB <####>. Please click on the following link if you would like to participate: <Insert Qualtrics Link Here>

Warmly,
Eric Price, MA, LPC-Intern


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