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Becoming the Parent of a GLB Son or Daughter

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Abstract

Recent research has documented the importance of parental reactions to disclosure for sexual minority youth (SMY) (e.g., Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009). The purpose of this study was to develop a deeper understanding of the parent perspective of the disclosure to family experience of SMY ages 14-21. In-depth interviews were conducted with eight parents in the United States who had experienced a child disclose their lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) orientation to them. Constructivist grounded theory and symbolic interaction theory informed the methodology and data analysis for the project. Analysis revealed that the process of becoming the parent of an LGB son or daughter is an appropriate narrative to conceptualize the parental experience of the disclosure to family process. The findings highlight how disclosure introduces new roles into the existing family system, which affects the consideration and interpretation of the salience of particular identities, such as being the parent of an LGB son or daughter.

Understanding how parents experience the disclosure to family process - particularly, how they understand and re-envision the meaning of being a parent - is crucial for research and intervention to help families become supportive of SMY. Limitations and suggestions for future research are presented.

Keywords

LGBQ; Sexual Minority Youth; Disclosure; Parents; Family; Qualitative Methods

Recent research has documented the importance of the family context, and parental reactions in particular, for the health outcomes for SMY (Bouris, Guilamo-Ramos, Pickard, Shiu, Loosier, Dittus & Waldmiller, 2010; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009; Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010; Saewyc, 2011). In order to address the documented health disparities, numerous researchers have called for the development of effective interventions for SMY (e.g., Bouris et al., 2010; Ryan et al., 2010; Saewyc, 2011). However, in order to most effectively intervene with SMY, including the family may be integral to the process (e.g., Bouris et al., 2010; Ryan et al., 2009; Ryan et al., 2010; Saewyc, 2011). Further, it is important to have a breadth of empirical scholarship on the psychosocial development and context of SMY and their families in order to develop components of effective interventions. This study seeks to add to the body of literature of the disclosure to family experience of SMY by exploring the parent perspective.

Youth Disclosure of Sexual Orientation to Family

The prevailing literature on disclosing to family suggests that sharing sexual orientation information with family can provoke feelings of anxiety and threats to personal well-being (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998). Despite these feelings, disclosing one's lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer (LGBQ) orientation to family is a common and important step of the larger sexual identity development and integration process that is commonly referred to as *coming out*. According to Rosario and colleagues (2001), sexual identity development “consists of exploring the emerging sexual identity and reducing the cognitive dissonance attributed to internalized negative evaluations of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals” (p. 135). Furthermore, “Identity integration includes acceptance of one's gay, lesbian, bisexual identity and sharing that aspect of the self with other individuals” (Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz, & Smith, 2001, p. 135). D'Augelli (1994, 2006) has proposed a human development model of LGB youth development within the family and larger ecological context which conceptualizes that disclosure to family or *becoming an LGB offspring* is an integral part of the sexual identity development and integration process. A recent report of a study of 10,000 LGBT-identified youth ages 13-17 found that 56% were out to their immediate family (Human Rights Campaign, 2012).

Most of the research on the experience of disclosing one's LGBQ orientation to family centers on initial parental reactions and subsequent outcomes of the SMY. Savin-Williams and Ream (2003) found that the most common reactions of parents were reported as supportive or very supportive or slightly negative, including feelings of disbelief that their child was LGB (e.g. the parent thought it was a phase) or concern that their child would face a difficult life. Initial parental reactions of rejection, physical attack, or screaming have been reported at rates of 4-18% (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). Differences between mothers' and fathers' reactions has been mixed; some research has indicated no differences between males and females on their mothers' or fathers' reactions to their sexual orientation (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2005; Kuhar, 2007; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003) while others consistently report that fathers respond more negatively than mothers (D'Augelli, 2002; D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 2001; Sullivan & Wodarski, 2002).

Despite the prevailing negative rhetoric around disclosing to family, many parent-child relationships either stay the same or improve after disclosure (Kuhar, 2007; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). Recent research indicates that there may be both short and long-term gains for SMY to disclose their sexual orientation to family, particularly within a family environment of openness and connectedness. In addition, current literature has documented clear health benefits, such as higher self-esteem and less substance abuse, for adolescents who experience accepting reactions from their parents as a result of disclosure (Ryan et al, 2010). The research further suggests that adolescents who have disclosed experience greater comfort with their sexuality, less internalized homophobia, and fewer problems disclosing their sexual orientation to friends (D'Augelli, 2002; D'Augelli et al., 1998; Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995).

It is likely that youth who choose not to disclose to parents have their reasons, such as protecting themselves from disclosure-related violence, verbal harassment, or other negative consequences (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; D'Augelli et al., 1998; Safren & Heimberg, 1999; Savin-Williams, 1994). Ryan and colleagues (2009) found that LGB youth and young adults who reported higher levels of family rejection during adolescence were 8.4 times more likely to have attempted suicide, 5.9 times more likely to report high levels of depression, and 3.4 times more likely to report illegal drug use and to have engaged in unprotected sexual intercourse compared with peers from families that reported no or low levels of family rejection.

The Parent Perspective

Relatively little research explores why parents react the way they do. Parental reactions can be negatively affected by misinformation, religious beliefs, and homophobia (Sullivan and Wodarski, 2002; Newman and Muzzonigro, 1993). Positive family dynamics such as cohesion, adaptability, and authoritative parenting have been found to be related to positive familial reactions and fewer negative outcomes to a child's disclosure of a sexual minority orientation (Beaty, 1999; Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006).

It is important to note that much of the research on parental reactions relies on the LGB youth's recollection of parents' responses (D'Augelli, 2006). However, some studies have described parental responses as reported by the parents. Studies have found that it is not uncommon for parents to report experiencing sadness, denial, regret, depression, guilt/shame, and concern for their child's well-being (Herdt & Koff, 2000; Robinson, Walters, & Skeen, 1989). Boxer, Cook, and Herdt (1991) described parents experiencing a period of family disruption following learning of their child's sexual minority orientation. However, Ben-Ari (1995) noted that both LGB youth and their parents saw honesty as the greatest benefit of disclosure.

Several recent qualitative studies have attended to the parent experience of disclosure beyond initial reactions. Using an anthropological approach with participants of an LGB parent support group, Fields (2001) identified several themes that reflected what these parents were struggling with: lack of social scripts to assist them in learning their child was LGB, dealing with a sense of loss, wanting to encourage heterosexual norms with their children, and confronting the concept of normalcy. Saltzburg (2004) elicited five themes from her in-depth interviews: awareness that their child was different, feelings of distress associated with knowing with certainty after coming out, a period of emotional detachment between parents and children, fear of estrangement as a parent and role model due to an inability to relate to the LGB subculture, and a time of adjustment and education by seeking community resources and social support.

In the past few years, several studies have departed from the prevailing deficit approach to studying SMY and their families, and instead focused on positive themes such as development, success, and positive experiences. Phillips and Ancis (2008) and Goodrich (2009) explored a new process of identity development as the parent of sexual minority child. Phillips and Ancis (2008) took a narrative approach and described three periods of

adjustment that contained cognitive-behavioral elements with “turning points” (p. 132) as transition periods. Goodrich (2009) focused on parents who had successfully integrated their experience since their child disclosed to them, describing an emergent model characterized by emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses that led to a successful integration of their identity. A recent qualitative survey study by Gonzalez, Rostosky, Odom & Riggle (2013) found that many parents experienced and associated positive emotions, improved closeness, and personal growth with parenting an LGBTQ child.

Statement of Purpose

This study seeks to extend the research on the parent perspective of the experience of disclosure to family of SMY. While there has been some movement across the literature base to examine the disclosure experience from the perspective of youth or parents, move beyond initial reactions, and away from a deficit approach, the literature is largely focused on an individual, rather than an interpersonal or family systems, perspective. The author approached the study from a constructionist grounded theory perspective (Charmaz, 2006), rooted in the interpretive constructionist paradigm and informed by symbolic interaction theory.

Methodology

The data from this study come from a larger project of youth and parents conducted to understand SMYs’ experience with disclosure of sexual orientation information to family of origin.

Participants

Institutional Review Board (IRB) procedures for the protection of human subjects were employed for this study. Convenience sampling was the primary purposeful sampling strategy (Patton, 1990). Participants were primarily recruited through advertising efforts with local LGBTQ and LGBTQ-serving organizations (e.g. local Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) chapters) in a Midwestern state in the United States. Recruitment sites/venues were provided with flyers and cards with information about the project for posting and distribution. In addition, project advertisements were placed in local shops and stores and a letter about the project and a flyer was sent to several area churches that are known for being open and affirming to the LGBTQ community in the surrounding metropolitan area. Participants who responded to recruitment efforts were screened to determine if they met the eligibility criteria for participation. Parents were eligible if they had a child who was between the ages of 14-21 when the child disclosed their sexual orientation to them. This disclosure had to have occurred within the past five years. The five-year timeframe is appropriate because a child's disclosure of a same-sex orientation is a significant autobiographical event for parents. Literature on memory indicates that events resulting in emotional arousal are remembered more accurately and consistently (Smith, Bibi, & Sheard, 2003). Interview strategies were employed in order to prompt successful recall of the disclosure event itself and the autobiographical detail associated with it. This includes contextualizing the event to time, environment, and person. Exclusion criteria included the ability to speak and understand English. This was imperative given the verbal

nature of the project. Of those formally screened, only one parent did not meet eligibility criteria to participate. In addition, after screening and during the time of the interview, it was revealed that one participant's child had first disclosed at age 13. This participant's experience is included in the sample.

Data Collection

Two methods of qualitative data collection were employed - questionnaires and individual interviews. The purpose of the pre-interview questionnaire was to gather demographic and biographical information in an unobtrusive and time-efficient way so that the interview and data analysis could be informed by this information. Participants were encouraged to elaborate on answers in the margins or space provided at the end of the questionnaire to encourage more contextualized information rather than forced responses. The questionnaire gathered basic demographic information (age, gender, ethnicity/race) as well as information about their sexual minority child's sexual identity development and integration milestones. Parent-child closeness was assessed using the Parent Child Closeness inventory (PCC; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991). The original instrument was modified to obtain the parent's perspective of closeness with their child. Sum scores for the nine items range from nine to 45. In this sample, internal consistency was high ($\alpha = .84$). The insights garnered from the questionnaires were used to further contextualize the participant's psychosocial context.

Individual, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were employed to elicit parental perceptions of the disclosure process and experience, and to gain insight into how substance use may affect the family context within which disclosure to family occurs. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured constructivist grounded theory format (Charmaz, 2006). In addition, the tone of the interview followed a responsive interviewing style (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). This style of qualitative research interview enables interview questions, probes, and follow-up questions and the tenor of the interview to be tailored to each participant. Questions and probes in four main areas guided the interviews: (1) description of family context and dynamics, (2) relationship with child prior to disclosure, (3) detailed information about the disclosure experience, and (4) current relationship with child. The average length of the interviews was 84 minutes long with a range of 66 minutes to 123 minutes. Interviews were transcribed and then double-checked for accuracy and to verify identifying information was removed.

Data Analysis

Constructivist grounded theory methods for data analysis were employed (Charmaz, 2000, 2002) for this study. Preliminary analysis of transcripts and pre-interview questionnaires began as soon as transcription for each interview was complete, resulting in interviews and data analysis occurring simultaneously. Deeper analysis occurred once the majority of data were collected. Analysis of the questionnaires involved synthesizing the information and was used to describe, situate and contextualize the experiences of the participants to provide a richer description of participants' experiences by further contextualizing their experiences and aid in the reporting of the findings. The heterogeneity of participants' demographic and

biographical characteristics and other lived experiences provides a generative source for different categories of analysis.

Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000, 2002) data analysis employs “constructivist induction” (p. 48). Understanding emerges from the data that are created through the researcher and participant interaction (Daly, 2007). A three-part coding scheme was developed through the use of initial line-by-line, open coding to identify concepts or “meaning units” (Charmaz, 2000) within each interview. Selective coding involves using recurrent concepts to begin to create categories and sorting through data. Through the use of open and selective coding, themes began to emerge. The constant comparative method was used to sort and make sense of emerging concepts, categories and themes within and across interviews. Concepts, categories, and themes were all coded. Charmaz (2000) describes that the constant comparative method means (a) comparing interviews, (b) comparing data within the same interview, (c) comparing situations and concepts within and across interviews, (d) comparing data with the emerging category, and (e) comparing categories to each other. As concepts, categories and themes emerge from the data analysis, interview probes and follow up questions were used to allow for emerging concepts to be explored with new participants in an effort to move towards saturation and to achieve “thick description” (Geertz, 1973). The software NVIVO 9.0 was utilized in this study to aid data analysis. Several steps were taken to increase the rigor of the study (e.g., the use of knowledgeable insiders, peer-debriefing, negative case analysis, analytical triangulation, and an audit trail).

Findings

Quotes and excerpts from the interviews are presented to both describe and enrich the findings. Following the quotes, participant pseudonym and age of parent will be identified in parentheses (e.g., Eve, age 47). As this is a primarily qualitative study, statistical results are used only to provide a richer understanding of the findings. First, demographic and descriptive information related to sexual identity are presented followed by a brief discussion of the family dynamics of the participants. Secondly, findings related to the disclosure event will be presented. Finally, the emerging theoretical narrative of the process of *becoming the parent of an LGB son or daughter* will be presented and enriched by the parent perspective of the ongoing disclosure experience. The use of this phrasing is an elaboration upon the process “becoming an LGB offspring” referenced in D’Augelli’s (1994; 2006) human development model of LGB sexual identity development.

Demographic and Descriptive Characteristics of Participants

Eight parents participated in the study, six mothers and two fathers, age 34-57 ($M = 47.3$, $SD = 8.14$). All parents identified their ethnicity/race as White with one exception where one participant identified himself as Black. Four of the parents identified their religious and/or spiritual identity as Protestant or non-denominational Christianity, two parents described having no religious or spiritual identity, one parent identified as Catholic, and one as spiritual. Educational background and socioeconomic-status information was not collected. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the parents who participated in this study.

Six of the parents had a son and two had a daughter who they reported identified as a sexual minority. Parents reported that their child first disclosed their sexual minority orientation to them between the ages of 13 and 21 ($M = 16.62$, $SD = 3.15$). Two parents stated they were “very comfortable” when their child first disclosed their sexual orientation to them (25%), two parents stated they were “somewhat comfortable” (25%), three parents stated they were “somewhat uncomfortable”, and one parent stated they were “very uncomfortable”. Regarding comfort with their child's sexual orientation at the time of the interview, three parents reported they were “very comfortable” and five reported they were “somewhat comfortable”. None of the parents reported they were currently uncomfortable with their child's sexual orientation. Further analysis indicated younger parents experienced increased comfort, suggesting a salient interplay between age of parents and their reaction to their child's disclosure. Additionally, nearly all participants reported that their religious or spiritual identity was unrelated to their comfort with their child's sexual orientation. For example, only one parent reported that his religion/spirituality or moral values “very much” affected his comfort with his son's sexual identity and this parent's spiritual identity was centered on acceptance for all. Five parents reported that their comfort with their child's sexual orientation was “not at all” affected by their religion/spirituality or moral values.

Family Dynamics

The interviews revealed that parents in the sample typically described their families as high-functioning, healthy families (i.e. exhibiting a high degree of closeness, open communication, and as having flexible, but firm, boundaries). I would describe our family dynamic as close...I think of us as, in many ways, very solid, middle-of-the-road (Dara, age 57). Another parent described, I always thought we were kind of a Leave it to Beaver family¹...dinner at the table every night (Bette, age 56). Many of the participants made statements such as, *the kids and I are so close* (Alice, age 42), *we are very loving* (Eve, age 47), *we talk about just about everything* (Faith, age 34). The interviews evidenced some variance in the description of the discipline or parenting styles. Where some parents described, *I'm not very strict* (Hannah, age 55) others described, *I always felt we were stricter than most parents* (Bette, age 56). Participants' descriptions of their parenting typically reflected an authoritative parenting style: They would have to sit on the couch and tell me why they chose that course of action (Alice, age 42) but ranged from slightly authoritarian to slightly permissive parenting styles. The majority of mothers described their relationship with their child as very close, while the fathers reported a lower degree of closeness. The two fathers reported scores on the Parent-Child Closeness Inventory (PCC; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991) of 20 (Clay, age 46) and 35 (Greg, age 42), whereas the mothers all reported scores of 39 or above ($M = 37$, $SD = 7.30$; maximum sum score of 45). Further, parent seven's son lived out-of-state with his mother during a period of his adolescence and this affected the degree of closeness experienced. Despite reporting lower levels of closeness with their children, neither fathers in this sample reported feeling uncomfortable with their child's sexual orientation at the time of disclosure. Given the overall lack of variability in the way parents in this sample described their family dynamics,

¹Leave it to Beaver is a sitcom from the 1950s starring an all-white and heterosexual family representing the quintessential “American family” structured around the father, the family patriarch, and his relationship with his wife and children.

the data did not suggest any significant findings that could be attributed to specific family dynamics described in the interviews.

The Disclosure Event

Three of the eight parents reported that they had suspected their child was non-heterosexual prior to the disclosure event. For example, one father described, We were kind of talking about it because, you know, the whole prom thing. There were some weird things going on. And we were like, huh (Greg, age 42). One parent reported that she did not have suspicions prior to her daughter disclosing, but during the disclosure event, she knew instinctively when her daughter asked if she had time to talk.

Table 1 also illustrates the disclosure events of the parents and their child. The interviews with parents revealed varied perceptions of the circumstances that preceded the disclosure event. The parents described disclosure experiences with their child that indicated five planned disclosures and three unplanned disclosures. In six of the instances, the interviews suggested that the youth experienced some degree of readiness related to his or her personal sexual identity development process. For example, when asked why she felt her son chose to come out when he did, one parent described, I think he thought, why go years and years and years trying to deny who I am? (Hannah, age 55). Two parents described a perception of readiness and relationship circumstances: I think he might've met someone online. I think he wanted to finally open up, say here it is, I need to start dating (Alice, age 42). Relationship difficulties could also precede disclosure to parents. In one case, the disclosure was unplanned and prompted because the mother noticed a change in the youth participant's mood, that something had shifted. The mother described, We were in the TV room on the sofa and I said, 'I've had it. What is going on? You're not yourself. What happened (Bette, age 56)? Second-hand disclosure occurred for one of the unplanned disclosure events. In this instance, Clay (age 46) found out about his son's non-heterosexual orientation from the mother, who called him immediately after.

Emotional context and initial reactions—Parents described the disclosure event in ways that indicated a high degree of stress and/or emotionality. It was not uncommon for the child and/or parent to cry during the disclosure event. One parent shared her experience very viscerally:

He's like, 'uh, why don't we pull over somewhere. I need to talk to you.' ...At this point, I'm getting a little nervous...I undo my belt and I look at him...his eyes start to get misty and I'm like, Oh God, he's got a girl pregnant...And then he just looks at me and out of his mouth comes, I'm gay. When I get taken by surprise I start to turn red from my chest up and I could feel heat and redness just rising; I can't tell if he's joking, I can't tell if he's serious. And I look at him and then I see the tears in his eyes. He starts crying and I start crying and I'm just like, 'that's all you had to tell me?' (Alice, age 42).

Other parents described the disclosure event as having a more composed level of emotionality that still indicated a significant degree of tension felt by the parent and/or child:

He came downstairs and said he had to talk to me. I'm like, okay, and popped off the TV. He just sat down and said that he had something to tell me and he didn't want me to worry about him. Then he told me he was bisexual. And I said, "Okay. What does that mean?" So then we talked a lot of that kind of stuff over...I asked him pretty personal questions (Hannah, age 55).

Hannah's son later disclosed that he was gay and not bisexual

A few parents described feeling surprised: *Shock. I didn't see it coming* (Bette, age 56). Some parents described that one of the first reactions they experienced when their child disclosed to them was feeling as if the picture they had envisioned of their child's life was shattered:

Everything that I had envisioned, you know parents have this like little ball of fantasy in their head for their children, the white picket fence, the dog, the kids, the wife. [Gay son]'s popped (snaps fingers) and it was like this void...And it's really scary 'cause you don't know how to fill it...I've spent 20-some years with this whole reality for him and now there's this empty void and I don't know how to fill it (Alice, age 42).

It was also common for parent participants to describe becoming increasingly worried for their child's well-being once they disclosed. For example, when asked how she would describe her reaction when her son first disclosed, Eve (age 47) stated:

I was afraid. Fear, fear was my biggest thing. I was petrified. I thought somebody would hurt him, I mean, all the horrors of um, people not accepting him. Is life gonna be hard? Afraid of him being harassed at school. How do I tell people? How are people going to treat him?

Becoming the Parent of an LGB Son or Daughter

As the data analysis progressed, the grounded theoretical category of becoming the parent of an LGB son or daughter emerged as a salient representation of how the disclosure experience changes family roles. Parents had to create new identities for themselves as the parents of LGB sons or daughters

Parents described becoming more comfortable with their child's orientation over time. One parent who reacted by becoming overprotective and hyper-vigilant of her son's safety and well-being described, Once I finally realized that my son was gonna be safe, I got that out of my system. Then we just went back to normal life (Alice, age 42). Only one parent described grieving; you *have to bury your expectation of your child's life* (Dara, age 57).

All of the parents were able to reflect on what they felt went well regarding the disclosure to family experience. Some parents described that their children experienced relief once they disclosed to them: It just seemed like the universe came off his shoulders (Alice, age 42). One father described how he believed his relationship with his son has improved since he had a favorable reaction to his son's disclosure: I think our relationship has opened up quite a bit; it's loosened up a little bit. Because he was always a bit worried that I wouldn't care about him if he wasn't what I wanted him to be (Greg, age 42).

It was common for parents to describe their fears and vulnerabilities with understanding what it means for them to be the parent of an LGB son or daughter. Dara (57) expressed her fear that she would make mistakes in relating with her daughter now that she knew that her daughter identified as a lesbian. She described, you're like an ocean liner trying to turn around in the middle of the Pacific; and you're bound to have some missteps along the way. When asked how accepting she considers herself of her son's identification as a gay male, Hannah (age 55) stated:

Well, right now, I can sit here and tell you 'oh, I'm really accepting', but he's not brought a man home yet, so that'll be a different thing that I'll have to, I mean that will actually be, when he's in a relationship, that will tell the tale of how accepting I really am inside.

Disclosing to others that their child is not heterosexual and dealing with others' reactions to this knowledge are significant experiences of the process of becoming the parent of an LGB son or daughter. Eve (age 47) shared:

Now I gotta start dealing with it. If he wants to bring [her son's boyfriend] around family events and things like that, well then, we're gonna have to tell the family, because I'm not gonna exclude him. And then I got to the point where, if people weren't gonna accept him, then they were not gonna be in my life. I made a decision, if anybody gives me any type of negative feedback or you know, says bad things or don't want him around or don't wanna accept him then, I'm done with them. I drew a line.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to develop a deeper understanding of the parent perspective of the disclosure to family experience of SMY, while conceptualizing disclosure not as an event but as a process impacting the entirety of the family system. The current literature has largely focused on the child or the parent, without considering the interpersonal dynamics at work during and after disclosure. The findings of the study suggest that *becoming the parent of an LGB son or daughter* is an appropriate narrative to conceptualize the parental experience of the process of disclosure to family. Relevant literature and family theory will be used throughout the discussion to contextualize the findings from this study. Limitations of the study will be discussed and areas for future research and implications for families and professionals will be provided.

Becoming the parent of an LGB son or daughter is a complex process that emphasizes the relational nature of the experience of disclosure to family. Parents of SMY describe how the disclosure experience can be challenging and results in new understandings of what it means to be a parent of a child who identifies as a sexual minority. The narrative of *becoming* emphasizes that it is an active, ongoing process. The disclosure experience is shaped by a dynamic process that involves a dyadic, reciprocal, simultaneous exchange between SMY and their parent(s). Symbolic interaction describes the process through which individuals enact shared symbols and create meaning of self, others, and situations (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). The disclosure experience changes the parent-child relationship in that a parent's

perceptions and interactions with their child are necessarily affected. Parental appraisals of self (and a SMY's perception of parental appraisals of self) shape how a SMY experiences disclosure to family.

Disclosing to parent(s) introduces new roles into the family. Interactions among family members that occur throughout the disclosure process affect the consideration and interpretation of the salience of particular identities. SMY must consider what it will mean to become an LGB son or daughter. The traditional, linear view of sexual orientation identity development is concentrated on the individual experience of "coming out" to oneself (e.g., Carrion & Lock, 1997; Cass, 1979, 1984; Coleman, 1982; Rosario et al., 2001; Troiden, 1988, 1989). D'Augelli's (1994, 2006) human development model of LGB youth sexual identity development considers the role of the family and larger ecological context within the sexual identity development and integration process of sexual minority individuals. The findings from this project support D'Augelli's assertion of the importance of disclosing to family as an integral component of the sexual identity development and integration process. SMY do not "become" LGB sons or daughters upon disclosing to their parents; rather, the process is continual, if not cyclical, a dynamic interplay between their sexual identity and their role as sons or daughters (e.g. Grafsky, 2011). Few studies emphasizes the relational nature of the disclosure experience. This project provides further evidence that the sexual identity development and integration process may not be adequately understood from an individual perspective.

Parent-child relationships that were perceived by the youth participant to have a high degree of emotional closeness prior to disclosure were less likely to evidence a decrease in closeness after disclosure. While this is not a causal relationship, it does support research that suggests that positive disclosure experiences are related to existing positive family dynamics (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). Most of the participants in the study also described that parents became more accepting over time, which is consistent with previous research (e.g., Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Goodrich, 2009; Lee & Lee, 2006; Phillips & Ancis, 2008; Potoczniak et al., 2009; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003).

The multiple levels of self-reflexivity that occur within a family become emphasized when viewing the process of disclosure through the lens of symbolic interaction theory. Individuals are cognizant of the fact that other family members attach various meanings and interpretations to their interactions. This theoretical notion is evidenced in the data as some of the parents described experiencing shattered expectations, while attempting to conceal that internal dialogue from their child. As noted by Fields (2001), the quality of one's parenting is often assumed to be directly reflected in children's outcomes. Being the parent of an LGB child might be perceived as a moral failure. Parents struggle to reconcile their inability to have a "normal" child with external perceptions and judgments of parental inadequacy.

The theme of parental concern and worry for the safety and well-being of their sexual minority child was evidenced across the youth and parents in the study as an initial reaction and an actual cost and reward. For example, concern and worry were interpreted as costs when the parent was perceived as being overprotective and interpreted as a reward when the

youth expressed feeling supported by their parent. SMY. Johnson and Colucci (1999) suggest that adjustment of family rules, expectations, and boundaries necessary in adolescence and emerging adulthood may be difficult when a family is dealing with fear of social persecution. Some parents may have difficulty balancing the desire to protect their child and keep them safe and believing their child can be safe and happy in a social environment where homophobia is still prevalent. The parents in this sample described struggling with these issues and often sought the support of friends, other family members, various forms of social media, and groups such as Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). Other researchers have found that parents who are supportive of their sexual minority children also have benefited from these forms of support (Goodrich, 2009; Phillips & Ancis, 2008).

Younger parents in this sample reported feeling increased comfort at the time of the initial disclosure. It is unclear whether this finding is due to the age of the parent at the time of the child's disclosure or the age of the child, but it does suggest that further research should consider age of parents and children as an important variable in the disclosure to family experience. A 2011 United States public opinion poll found that more than six in ten respondents younger than age 50 agreed that same-sex orientations should be accepted (Pew Research Center, 2011). Further, a recent international opinion poll found that younger respondents were far more likely to report that society should be accepting of homosexuality (Pew Research Center, 2013). This is consistent with a global societal trend of increasingly greater acceptance of diverse sexual orientations (Pew Research Center, 2013; 2011) and a transformation of North American disclosure experiences occurring in the last decade (see Murray, 2010).

Anticipated reactions to disclosure seem to be influenced considerably by social norms and perceptions; media reports on youth-parent relations often contribute to stereotypes of negative consequence as a normal parental response (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). The findings related to age and the overall positive nature of the disclosure experiences described by the parents in this sample suggest that the dominant discourse of *coming out* to family may be changing. A recent study examining the positive aspects associated with being the parent of an LGBTQ child support this finding (Gonzalez et al 2013). Further, parents who experienced feelings of shock, sadness, or lost expectations, experienced these emotions during the initial disclosure event and not as part of their ongoing adjustment. While certainly not conclusive, these findings suggest the body of literature on parental reactions might be not be reflective of contemporary North American family experiences. Given the movement towards greater acceptance of same-sex orientation and relationships (Pew Research Center, 2013; 2011), scholars should be cognizant of the fast-pace in which these changes are taking place.

The parents in the sample typically described their families as high-functioning, healthy families (i.e. exhibiting a high degree of closeness, open communication, and having flexible, but firm, boundaries). Given that the existing literature on SMY and their families has been criticized for over-estimating negative experiences and worst-case scenarios (Bouris et al., 2010; Savin-Williams, 2001), this study provides a pertinent contribution to the literature. While there is a dearth of research exploring the family dynamics of SMY,

Darby-Mullins and Murdock (2007) found that family environment (i.e., conflict, cohesion, and expressiveness) was found to predict significant variance in the LGB youth's emotional adjustment (i.e., symptoms of depression and anxiety) and parental attitudes towards homosexuality were found to contribute to additional variance explained above and beyond that predicted by family environment alone.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations in this study. First, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to all SMY and parents of SMY. The participants in the study resided in one Midwestern U.S. state. The sample for this study was not ethnically or racially diverse. Previous research has documented that there may be unique factors that affect the disclosure to family experience for ethnic and racial minorities (e.g., Bouris et al., 2010; Merighi & Grimes, 2000). The small number of non-white participants in the project does not allow for comparisons to be made by race and ethnicity. In addition, educational background and socioeconomic-status data were not collected, thus no comparisons can be made by class differences. Finally, this sample of parents is small and only included two fathers. Theoretical sampling, a hallmark of grounded theory methodology, was not exhaustive. In constructivist grounded theory, theoretical sampling involves seeking pertinent data to continue to develop the emerging theory (Charmaz, 2006). Constructivist grounded theory methodology adopts a critical view of saturation that goes beyond repetition and finding the same patterns. Rather, saturation is dependent upon theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006). As such, saturation was not achieved for this project. Data from additional parents, from diverse locales, would likely provide a richer understanding of the disclosure experience from the perspective of parents that could enrich the description of the process emerging from the findings of this study.

Future Research

The findings from this study suggest several areas for future research that would deepen and strengthen the literature base on the disclosure experience to family. For example, the findings suggest that family dynamics may play an important role in the disclosure experience. Future research should include standardized measures of family dynamics such as the family adaptability and cohesion evaluation scale (FACES- IV; Olson, 2011), which assesses adaptability, cohesion, communication and satisfaction. In addition, research has already documented that parental responses to disclosure and emotional aspects of the parent-child relationship are related to health outcomes for SMY (see Bouris et al., 2010 for a review). Given the extent of scholarly support for the development of interventions for SMY (e.g., Bouris et al., 2010; Ryan et al., 2010; Saewyc, 2011), a detailed understanding of the family context of the youth and the parental perspective on the experience is warranted in order to effectively intervene.

Implications for Families and Helping Professionals

Beyond assisting with the disclosure decision process, helping professionals might be tasked with preparing SMY with disclosing to a particular family member. In general, more research is needed before specific suggestions can be made that would direct how elements of the disclosure event will affect subsequent disclosure outcomes. However, the findings

from this study suggest that the disclosure event is likely to be highly emotional for the parent. Further, this study, as well as literature on disclosure decisions in general, suggests that intimate disclosures (such as those that occur within the parent-child relationship) which contain a higher degree of emotion may be viewed more positively as compared to more fact-based disclosures that may contain little emotional content (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010). Youth should be prepared to expect a high degree of emotion and helping professionals could work with them to increase their capacity and self-efficacy for handling the emotional climate of the disclosure event. In addition, it is likely that parents and other family members will ask questions such as “are you sure,” “how long have you known,” “why didn't you tell me earlier,” “do you have a boyfriend/girlfriend,” “have you been sexually active with someone of the same-sex?” It would be helpful for youth to consider what kinds of questions they may be asked and how much information they are willing to share with their parents. Furthermore, helping professionals working with parents should be intentional about communicating to them that their child's sexual orientation does not necessarily impose a victim-centered narrative or pejorative label upon their family. Instead, in the spirit of symbolic interaction, parents and children are free to negotiate, co-create, and redefine their roles and family themes as they see fit, and adjust them as they become more comfortable with having a child with a non-heterosexual identity.

Conclusion

This study provides a unique contribution to the literature that places the emergent findings of the disclosure to family experience within the existing theoretical framework of symbolic interaction theory. Understanding how parents experience the disclosure to family process - particularly, how they understand and re-envision the meaning of being a parent - is crucial for research, intervention, and professionals to help families become supportive of SMY. The process of becoming the parent of an LGB son or daughter may be an appropriate narrative that may help parents become more supportive of their SMY. Assisting youth in disclosing their sexual orientation to their families and coping with parental reactions is an important challenge (Ryan et al., 2010). Such focus can help these youth become integrated into their families, decrease future risk, and enhance family support and closeness (D'Augelli et al., 2005). Despite the encouraging findings of this study, positive parent child relationships are still strained for many SMY given the presence of social stigma, fear of discrimination and anticipation of a negative disclosure experience, contributing to the isolation of these youth from their families (Russell, Driscoll, & Truong, 2002). Although disclosing one's LGBQ orientation to family is only one aspect of the sexual identity development and integration process of a sexual minority individual, it is a lifelong component due to the primacy of families in most people's lives (Laird, 1993).

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Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants and Disclosure Events

Pseudonym	Relationship to Youth	Parent Age	Parent Race/Ethnicity ^a	Religious or Spiritual Identity	Youth Identity	Age of Youth (at disclosure)	Method of Disclosure
Alice	Mother	42	White	None	Gay	20	In Person, Private
Bette	Mother	56	White	Non-denominational Christian	^b Gay	15	In Person, Private
Clay	Father	46	White	Spiritual	^b Gay	15	Second hand, from Mother
Dara	Mother	57	White	Non-denominational Christian	Lesbian	21	Phone
Eve	Mother	47	White	Christian	Gay	14	In person, private
Faith	Mother	34	White	None	Lesbian	13	In person, private
Greg	Father	42	Black	Methodist	Bisexual Male	20	In person, public
Hannah	Mother	55	White	Catholic	Gay	15	In person, private

Note:

^a White = not of Hispanic origin^b Same child