COMING OUT: ONE FAMILY’S STORY

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Disclosing one’s lesbian or gay sexual orientation, or “coming out,” may be the most stress-provoking life experience for lesbians and gay men. Coming out entails the initial step of acknowledging and owning a core part of one’s self. This step is followed by a period of uncertainty, chaos, and questioning as one grapples with the meaning of being a lesbian or a gay man (Savin-Williams, 1990). The identification as a lesbian or a gay man is further exacerbated by a sense of being alone in a world that suddenly seems cold and unfriendly. This crucial period of identity formation for lesbians and gay men takes on new meanings. In addition to the anticipated developmental process of what it means to be human and normal that heterosexual individuals experience, lesbians and gay men, in a predominantly heterosexist and homophobic world, confront additional challenges. Coming out under such conditions takes courage and a strong self-concept (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996). The ability to endure is crucial, as the process of coming out is ongoing and embedded in the events and relationships of everyday life (Oswald, 2000). Lesbians and gay men must continually negotiate appropriate time and place to come out in new contexts (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996).

After coming out to self, lesbians and gay men often come out to close friends first and only later, if at all, to family members (Herdt & Boxer, 1993; Savin-Williams, 1990). Coming out can be a “whole” family experience, as members wrestle to accept the news and to re-stabilize Jack’s family. A chain reaction ensues within Jack’s family as one person’s reaction or change creates change in another, making families dynamic and evolving, and yet seeking to maintain their homeostasis (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). This change in Jack’s family system although a shared experience, may be understood differently by each family member.

Although there have been attempts to study the reactions and effects of coming out on a family as a system, most studies rely on individual accounts of the lesbian or gay man. As noted in Demo and Allen (1996), “although studies reporting on the personal adjustment of individual family members are useful and important, they tell us little about characteristics of relationships (communication, decision-making, support, power, conflict and violence) in Jack’s family system” (p. 421). The need for attention on lesbian and gay male family relations to create a better understanding of diversity in families, and to be more informed when working with
families, is necessary in both Jack’s family studies literature (Allen & Demo, 1995), and Jack’s family therapy literature (Clark & Serovich, 1997). Lesbian and gay male family relationships around coming out experiences have been identified as an overall lack in the literature (Allen & Demo, 1995; Demo & Allen, 1996; Laird, 1993; Schneider, 1989; Tremble, Schneider, & Appathurai, 1989).

The need for studies that capture the multiple realities within family systems, based on the unique combinations of heredity, experiences, presuppositions, and perceptions of family members, is exemplified in Greenfield’s (1992) study on lesbian daughters and their parents. Both daughters and parents had constructed the meaning of coming out rather differently, making meaning a socially constructed phenomenon. Meaning-making depends on how persons account for and conceptualize the world in which they live, producing multiple ways of seeing and making sense of the world (Gergen, 1985). How families respond to the coming out of a family member as portrayed in the literature is said to be fragmented and incomplete (Strommen, 1989). Detailed investigations of lesbian and gay male families will help shed light on the intersections of sexual orientation, gender, and the ability of families to cope with stigma while forging permanent, enduring bonds without societal support (Allen & Demo, 1995). The call towards capturing the myriad views of lesbian and gay male family members is towards holistic, ethnographic studies from the standpoint of Jack’s family (Laird, 1993).

Purpose of the Study

Literature on the coming out experiences of families serves to increase awareness of the process that families enter as a member comes out as a lesbian or a gay man. Family therapists and other professionals working with lesbians and gay men and their families will be more informed as to potential family stressors and of family needs. For example, work with an adolescent dealing with identity formation may need to include an exploration of the individual’s identity as the sibling of a lesbian or gay man (Crosbie-Burnett, Foster, Murray, & Bowen, 1996). Practitioners can also help family members clarify their thoughts and feelings about their new role as a member of a gay family, and communicate it to others in their social context and in addition, explore Jack’s family’s social support networks (Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996).

Green (1996) found most family therapists who work with gay individuals and their families extrapolating from their experiences with the majority of their clients who tend to be heterosexual. They rely on generic therapeutic values about honesty, revealing family secrets,
and the importance of closeness with families-of-origin, when the social support sought by lesbians and gay men is often void of one’s kin. He attributes the lack of scholarly literature as a reason for such extrapolation.

The lack of scholarly literature on coming out as experienced by individual family members is the catalyst of this study. I examined the reactions of each family member to the coming out process and how each one experiences the process. This study focuses on the meaning-making of the coming out experience of individual members within Jack’s family and of Jack’s family as a whole, as they interact with one another and with the larger system beyond Jack’s family unit. The findings contribute to the deficit in the literature on the coming out of a gay family member by acknowledging and enquiring about multiple views of reality.

Theoretical Frameworks

Two theoretical frameworks guided this study: family systems and social constructionism. Family as a system is a collection of parts interacting as a single entity (Davidson, 1983). A change in one person in a family changes the whole family system. For families to maintain relative constancy and internal functioning, families have a tendency towards stability or homeostasis (Jackson, 1965). This concept of family homeostasis implies that although families resist change in an effort to maintain its equilibrium, families must change to adapt to changing circumstances. To do so would require families to revise their rules and modify their structure (Nichols & Schwartz, 1991). Rigidity and inflexibility within families can potentially obstruct Jack’s family from returning to a place of equilibrium making it important to focus on the interaction and relationships within a system or among systems rather than on the substance of their parts (Davidson, 1983).

Family systems are living organisms that strive for and have the potential and inner strength to change (Bogdan, 1987). Individuals shape the world in which they live, thereby creating their own reality within a context of a community of others – a reciprocal connection (Gergen, 1989). Gergen’s reciprocal connection cites a family as one such context where members define themselves in their interaction with other members’ perceived understanding of them. Members of a family each construct their own reality about an experience based on their beliefs, maps, and premises about the world, or epistemology (Bateson, 1972) as they simultaneously co-construct meaning within the context of a family system. The process of
constructing and understanding the environment based on one’s unique life experience leads to the existence of multiple ways of understanding a shared experience.

Families can, therefore, be viewed as meaning-generating social systems where members construct a sense of self that arises “not only through their discourse with others, but is their discourse with others,” (Lax, 1992, p. 71). The social discourse or interchange between individuals mediated through language leads to the unfolding of meaning and intention in human behavior. It is in this space between people, in the realm of the “common world,” that knowledge evolves and where individuals develop a sense of identity or an inner voice (Gergen, 1985). This inner voice, or the perceived reality of individuals, created within the context of family systems, is the core theoretical component that guided this study.

Research Questions

The process of listening to a family’s coming out experience entails capturing as much of the whole story as possible. Coming out is often a planned event where a myriad of issues and circumstances informs the lesbian or gay man’s decision to come out (Savin-Williams, 1990). The story begins with motivations that lead to their coming out. After the words are spoken, lesbians and gay men and their families are challenged as their realities may take a different form. They are then confronted with post-disclosure experiences and reactions that call for mechanisms of coping and eventually the reconstruction of their realities (Gergen, 1989). This study explores the issues that affect the coming out process, the effects of coming out (i.e., changes to family members’ relationship with one another), and the ways of reconciling the new information with coming out.

The following research questions guided this study:

1) What is the meaning-making process around coming out for Jack’s family collectively and for each member of Jack’s family individually?

2) In what ways has coming out changed Jack’s family’s subsystems?

3) What role do external sources of information or resources such as media, other gay families, support groups, or non-family members play in the process of Jack’s family coming out?

4) How do family members individually and collectively reconcile or deal with dichotomies and contradictions that may exist between accepting their gay member and their family’s values?
5) How does having a gay family member change the distribution of power in Jack’s family, the roles of family members and the overall developmental process of Jack’s family?

Operational Definition of Key Terms and Concepts

Coming out refers to the process of declaring one’s identity to be gay to families, friends, or others who assume the person to be heterosexual (Boxer, Cook, & Herdt, 1991).

Family-of-choice consists of family-of-origin and individuals who provide support and together with the gay individual participate in family rituals and perform functions similar to close biological family (Laird, 1996).

Family-of-origin consists of biological parents and siblings of the gay individual.

Gay (without a specified gender) refers to both lesbians and gay men. Many writers have struggled with how to refer to gay men and women as a group. As an author, I have chosen to use the term “gay” to ease writing where the specification of gender is cumbersome.

Heterocentrism refers to the “assumption that development naturally proceeds in a heterosexual direction” (Savin-Williams, 2001, p. 15). It is an assumption that leads one to assume and behave as if everyone is a heterosexual.

Homonegativity refers to “negative feelings, attitudes, and behaviors toward those with same-sex attractions” (Savin-Williams, 2001, p. 15). It is the belief that heterosexuality is a more viable way of life.

Homophobia refers to an irrational and distorted view of gay culture and gay persons which is commonly manifested as prejudice or general discomfort with gay culture (Gonsiorek, 1988), i.e., the emotional expression of negative attitudes towards gay culture (Savin-Williams, 2001).

Internalized homophobia refers to the process where a gay individual confronts their own homophobia (Morin & Garfinkle, 1978). Internalized homophobia begins when individuals come to recognize their gay identity after having internalized society’s view of gay as unacceptable prior to their conscious awareness of gay desires (Maylon, 1982).

Lesbian and gay male families refers to families with at least one lesbian or gay male member (Allen & Demo, 1995), although it has been recommended that families in which members have different sexual orientations be referred to as “dual-orientation” families, or mixed “gay/straight” families (Laird, 1993).
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Studies of lesbian and gay male individuals and their families on the topic of coming out have mostly revolved around the process of coming out. These studies mostly investigate the factors that lead to the decision to come out to family members, and the effects of coming out on parent-child relationships. Fewer studies are available on the effects on the whole family-of-origin. This section reviews empirical studies on coming out to families and highlight the lacks in the literature. It also explains how this study contributes to existing literature.

The Decision to Come Out

The decision to come out to Jack’s family is determined by many factors. The struggle with uncertainty and confusion appears to be a major factor that determines the timing of coming out. Individuals endure an average of six years of uncertainty and generally wait two years after identifying themselves as a lesbian or a gay man before disclosing their sexual orientation to someone they trust (D’Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998; Savin-Williams, 1998). The person first trusted with the news is rarely a family member. When disclosure is eventually made to a family member, it is normally first to mothers rather than to fathers. This preference in disclosure is highlighted in a synthesis of 10 empirical studies (otherwise not mentioned in this dissertation) on lesbian and gay male youth conducted by Savin-Williams (1998).

Siblings of lesbians and gay men were reported to receive coming out news before parents and were often used by lesbians and gay men to test the reactions of parents (Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996). They are often left with the “burden of knowing” and struggle with remaining loyal to the gay sibling. Although the act of disclosure may demonstrate the existence of trust in the person who is its target, as argued by Holtzen, Kenny and Mahalik (1995), Miller and Boon’s (2000) study suggest otherwise. Miller and Boon’s survey research on 47 mother-son relationships found that perceived changes in feelings of trust for mothers, thought to have a bearing on adult gay men’s decision to come out to their mothers, did not hold true. In fact the lack of perceived supportive responses from mothers did not deter the coming out process. A majority of the adult gay men did not recall experiencing a corresponding loss of trust of their mothers despite receiving negative responses.

Researches have found that the quality of communication among family members is a factor that facilitates coming out. Kaffko’s (1994) survey research of 44 men and 49 women, of
whom 61 had come out to their families-of-origin, found that the depth in which families shared information and communicated with each other influenced member’s coming out to their families. In-depth sharing among members was thought to reflect the receptiveness of family environment to hear and respond, thereby creating a safe haven for disclosure. After disclosure, family boundaries were realigned leading to a more equitable distribution of power, a greater sense of attachment and independence of family members. These changes in Jack’s family system enabled them to be more expressive and open to share stressful life events.

Similar findings were reported in Leaveck’s (1994) survey of lesbian and gay male college youth. Respondents, who rated their families as good problem solvers and communicators, reported significantly better post-disclosure relationships with their parents. They cited problem-solving abilities as helping mediate stressful life events. A history of communicating clearly and working together to solve problems may better equip families to adjust and accept the child’s sexual orientation.

The perception of availability of pro-gay resources, identity expression and perceived family relations was also found to be indicative of disclosure of gay sexual orientation. Waldner and Magruder (1999) surveyed 172 adolescents originating from a clinical group for lesbian and gay male youth. They found that participants who reported “getting along well” with their families also perceived fewer resources, as they placed less value in finding alternative information. They furthermore believed it to be more costly to violate heterosexual values by expressing their gay identity, and feared rejection. Family relations were found to significantly influence identity expression negatively. Similarly, the fear of rejection and the high risk of alienation, and the fear of hurting their parents were important reasons for not disclosing their sexual orientation as cited by participants in Leaveck’s (1994) study.

Waldner and Magruder’s (1999) study findings suggests that the effects of family relations may be overcome with the availability of supportive resources and opportunity. A study of 105 lesbian, gay male and bisexual youth residing with their parents in metropolitan areas (D’Augelli et al., 1998), found that affiliation with social and support groups was a useful source of effective coping strategies for dealing with familial victimization after coming out. Those living in more rural areas with fewer resources were at a disadvantage. Elevated suicide attempts among lesbian and gay male youth as found by D’Augelli et al. (1998) may be another factor that prevents self-disclosure to family members among lesbian and gay male youth.
Gender differences are also evident in the coming out process. Gay men peak around adolescence in their discovery and the owning of their sexual orientation, whereas lesbian women begin to identify their sexual orientation much more gradually in their mid-20s on through their 30s and 40s (Bell, Weinberg, & Hammersmith, 1981). Kaffko (1994) suggests that lesbian women’s later self-labeling could be due to the political power structure of society that places women in a lower status, forcing them to be more attuned to other’s needs as they are caught in the role of “kin-keeper.” The added stress of being responsible for others, coupled with diminished perceived support and understanding from other family members could inhibit women’s coming out process.

The Effects of Coming Out on Families

The fear of anticipated reactions of family members appears to be the largest hurdle lesbians and gay men need to overcome before coming out to their families. Their anticipated fear is apt, as coming out to family members is often followed by a period of destabilization for Jack’s family. Parents of lesbians and gay men in particular react negatively with shock, anger, embarrassment, and rejection (Ben-Ari, 1995; D’Augelli et al., 1998; Strommen, 1989). Although parent-child relationships undergo a high degree of strain immediately following coming out, they often improve over time as families assimilate and re-adjust to accommodate the “news”. Scholars have tried to make sense of the aftermath of coming out and identify the patterns of change that occur in families. Various views and models have emerged from studies.

In-depth interviews with 32 lesbian and gay male adults and 27 of their parents were conducted by Ben-Ari (1995), who subsequently identified a three stage linear model of the effect of coming out on parents: pre-discovery, discovery, and post-discovery. In the pre-discovery stage, the fear of being rejected by parents is the greatest fear faced by lesbians and gay men, whereas the fear of confronting gay sexual orientation is their parents’ greatest fear. In the discovery stage, the actual words used to initially come out significantly affect the adjustment of the individual coming out and their parents. Finally, parental reaction to the disclosure is the most important aspect of the post-discovery stage.

Another linear model was also identified by Robinson, Walters, and Skeen (1989), from their survey of 402 parents of lesbians and gay men. Their five stage model is essentially similar to the stages of grief by Kubler-Ross (1969): denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance; and as outlined by Sauerman (1984): shock, denial, guilt, expression of feelings,
personal decision-making and true acceptance. Parents’ identification of their child as a heterosexual person is demolished, and they must grieve in order to rebuild a new identification for their child.

Bernstein (1990), a marriage and family therapist, provides an alternative non-linear or sequential model. He based his model on in-depth interviews with 62 parents of lesbians and gay men who were his clients, and discovered recurring themes centered on their children’s sexual orientations. Social stigma towards themselves as inadequate parents, and towards their children as sick or deviant, is the major obstacle to parental acceptance. The question of causality and self- and spouse-blame, and parental loss of their hopes, dreams and expectations for a traditional family life for their children, and of grandchildren from their children are also huge obstacles. Fears of social isolation, discrimination against their children, and the concern over Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) and their gay male children are other recurring themes. The fear of losing their children if they do not accept their sexual orientation, eventually led parents to come to terms with their struggles as they learned to accept their children.

Robinson et al. (1989) also found that despite fear of the spread of AIDS and that their offspring could contract it, parents’ positive feelings toward their child did not change. Attitudes toward AIDS were not different between fathers and mothers, and older parents held more positive attitudes towards AIDS than did younger parents. Consequently, younger gay men and lesbians struggled more with disclosing their sexual orientation. D’Augelli et al. (1998) also found disturbing parental reactions following disclosure by lesbian and gay male youth unlike those experienced by older lesbian and gay male adults. While 50% of mothers and siblings and 25% of fathers were accepting, 25% of fathers and 10% of mothers were rejecting. Rejection was expressed in the form of threats, and verbal and physical abuse, which were constant over time. Many youth who chose non-disclosure and secrecy were in fact protecting themselves.

The initial negative reaction of parents after the coming out of their lesbian or gay male child is echoed in a series of other studies. Cramer and Roach’s (1988) survey questionnaire seeking gay men’s perception of their parent-son relationship over time yielded 93 responses. Although a period of turmoil usually ensued for most families immediately following disclosure, the parent-son relationships improved over time and in many cases became better than they were prior to disclosure. The authors unexpectedly found 21% of the 93 respondents reported immediate improvement in their relationship with their fathers after disclosure. Additionally,
parents who were perceived as having more traditional sex-role attitudes, and who held stronger religious orthodoxy, both of which are associated with homophobia, reported to be more accepting of their sons following disclosure. Parents’ conviction concerning the value of Jack’s family unity was cited as a possible source of strength that helped the families overcome the threat to family cohesion. Another possible explanation provided was that respondents may have been expecting more negative reactions from their conservative parents than they actually received, which facilitated a more open relationship with their parents.

Holtzen and Agresti (1990) and Johnson (1992) offered further but inconclusive explanations about parental homophobia. Holtzen and Agresti’s (1990) survey of 55 parents of lesbians and gay men found homophobia to be a multidimensional construct. Parents’ degrees of homophobia were found to be indicative of the amount of time they knew about their child’s sexual orientation, their sense of social self-esteem, and sex-role stereotype beliefs. Johnson (1992), who surveyed parents of lesbians and gay men, reported that parents who had greater numbers of children, less social contact with gay communities, greater endorsement of religious orthodoxy, traditional gender-role stereotyping, and authoritarian values were expected to respond to their child with more homophobia. Both studies identified possible predictors of parental homophobia that can be helpful for practitioners working with the coming out process of lesbians and gay men.

Gender role beliefs were also suggested to affect parental responses to their gay child’s coming out. Gender role beliefs associated with attitudes toward gay sexual orientation were partially supported in Leaveck (1994) where fathers who were rated high on traditional gender role beliefs had poorer relationships with their lesbian daughters. Gay men, on the other hand, reported that their mothers’ gender role beliefs were predictive of their post-disclosure relationship with their fathers; traditional maternal gender role beliefs were found to correspond with poor relationships with fathers.

Differences in parental gender roles, the focus of Greenfield’s (1992) mixed methodology (interviews and questionnaires) study of lesbians, their mothers and fathers, also found different adaptation processes within families following coming out for mothers and fathers. Mothers’ emotional aspects of the adaptation process tend to be volatile and relationally oriented with the focus on issues such as separation, closeness and distance from their lesbian daughters. Mothers’ communication with their daughters, however, tended to remain steady throughout the process,
with more homophobic mothers reporting poorer communication. Mothers’ negative stereotypes about lesbians also lessened over time as their attitudes towards lesbians became more positive. Fathers, on the other hand, seem to not change over time in terms of their degree of denial, homophobia, and communication experience. They may not be aware of going through much of a process, or may not associate their experience with their daughters’ coming out process.

Although there are a growing number of empirical studies that identify the effects of coming out on family members, particularly parents, most studies do not include family members as study participants. As reported earlier, parents’ and other family members’ reactions are often sought from the perspective of the lesbian or gay man who had come out (e.g., Cramer & Roach, 1988; D’Augelli et al., 1998; Kaffko, 1994; Leaveck, 1994; Miller & Boon, 2000; Plastock, 1998; Savin-Williams, 1989; Waldner & Magruder, 1999) rather than from direct reports. Some progress towards giving voice to family members can be seen in studies that include at least one parent of lesbians and gay men (Ben-Ari, 1995; Bernstein, 1990; Greenfield, 1992; Holtzen & Agresti, 1990; Johnson, 1992; Robinson et al., 1989). Beeler and DiProva (1999) and Oswald (2000) provide the few studies that include family members other than lesbians or gay men’s parents.

Beyond the Parent-Child Dyad

Attempts at soliciting the views of lesbians’ and gay men’s family members other than parents, need to be commended. The few studies that include members of extended families provide valuable information that further assists in understanding and conceptualizing the complexities of families during times of change. Plastock’s (1998) survey research sought 100 lesbians’ and 115 gay men’s perspectives regarding their parents’ and grandparents’ relationships and roles. The study found that grandparents were generally not as involved in Jack’s family adjustment post coming out and did not play active mediator roles. Many parents and their children closed ranks and kept the child’s coming out within the parent-child subsystem. Maternal grandmothers, however, took significantly less time to accept their lesbian or gay male grandchild than did mothers, in light of the “once removed” position held by grandparents in relation to their grandchildren.

The study also found that grandparents did not intercede in family struggles, and most waited to be asked. While individuals viewed their mothers and maternal grandmothers as greater sources of support, their relationships with their maternal grandfathers appeared to be
more strained compared to their relationships with their other grandparents. The child’s relationship with their grandparents was also not any more positive than with their parents post coming out. Although the study was conducted from the perspective of the lesbian or gay man, it was nevertheless a contribution that allows insight into their family relationship beyond families-of-origin.

Extending research beyond Jack’s family, Oswald (2000) found that the coming out of lesbian women affected their relationships with families and friends in terms of changes in communication, relationship structure, and beliefs. Her investigation of four bisexual and two lesbian college-aged women and their “networks” included a total of 31 participants ranging from 15 to 55 years of age. Change in communication included individuals talking about coming out, engaging in conflict and asking questions of self and others. Changes in relationship structure led to establishing or redefining a positive personal connection to lesbians and gay men, their identity, culture and resources, and negotiating distance and closeness with people. Their coming out also led to changes in beliefs about themselves, and about other lesbians and gay men. The process of coming out was found to be more than an internal orientation claimed by the individual. It is an ongoing process of declaring and maintaining an identity embedded within events and relationships of everyday life.

Beeler and DiProva (1999) offer a breakthrough in research where members of four families were interviewed individually for a total of 16 interviews. The interviews were unstructured, and were geared towards examining the relationship between family themes and narrative accounts of families’ responses to the coming out of a family member. The study expands the boundaries of research and exploration, although it lacks ethnic diversity. Twelve themes around family adjustment following the coming out of a lesbian or gay male member were identified. They were: (1) establishing rules for discussing gay sexual orientation, (2) including lesbian and gay male friends in Jack’s family(3) working with feelings of sadness, loss, and blame, (4) the coming out of Jack’s family(5) developing alternative visions for the future, (6) seeking information about gay sexual orientation and gay communities, (7) second-guessing the sexuality of others, (8) exposure to other lesbian and gay male individuals, (9) making gay sexual orientation less exotic, (10) dealing with the heterosexual world’s conventions, (11) developing narrative coherency, and (12) stigma management.
Beeler and DiProva (1999), unlike Ben-Ari (1995) and Robinson et al. (1989), but similar to Bernstein (1990), found no indication that themes were sequential. In fact, they contended that themes occurred independent of the grieving process and may be observed in any or all of the stages of grieving. These themes indicate that Jack’s family responds on multiple levels: intrapsychic, interpersonal, familial, and social.

Critical Analysis of Literature

Although there has been increasing emphasis on including Jack’s family and network members of gay individuals in recent studies, either directly or through the perspective of the gay individual, focus on the whole family’s coming out process is lacking. The few studies that elicit the stories of family or network members of gay individuals identify the themes that are evident in the coming out process but do not focus on the process itself, i.e., the process of the coming out experience. Furthermore, the similarities cited in the coming out process with bereavement models of Kubler-Ross (1969) and Sauerman (1984) is over-simplified. The process of getting from one stage of coming out to another is not explained. The linearity of the coming out process has moreover failed to hold true in subsequent studies (Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Bernstein, 1990). There appears to be more to the emotional response of gay individuals coming out to Jack’s family, such as a change in the relationships among family members and within their communities.

The change in Jack’s family system is another essential feature that has not received significant attention in the literature. Although studies mention that a change occurs after a family member comes out as gay and list the factors that influence the change (Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Oswald, 2000), the process of the change is largely ignored. An understanding of the process of change and the qualitative aspects of the change can contribute to the overall understanding of family life and family process.

Studies have also concentrated predominantly on urban populations. There remains a paucity of studies on rural populations that are known to have fewer and smaller support resources in addition to a higher susceptibility to stigmatization. The one study (qualitative) in Northern New England (Cody & Welch, 1997) examined the coping skills of 20 gay men (all White, majority professionals) and how they understand their life experiences. The reliance on the support of other gay members in the community was found to be key in helping the men manage their sense of isolation in a rural area. The challenges faced and resilience demanded in
rural populations is likely to be substantially more pressing than in urban populations that tend to have more access to resources (Savin-Williams, 2001). This potential difference deserves appropriate attention to an otherwise marginalized urban population.

Significance of Proposed Study to Existing Work

The overall trend towards recognizing the existence of multiple views within family units and how they affect Jack’s family as a whole is lacking in the literature. Lesbians’ and gay men’s families encompass more than the parent-child dyad and often expand beyond families-of-origin. Many families have moved beyond the traditional definition that confines itself to parents and their children. Terms such as “blended families,” “surrogate families,” and “extended families” are becoming familiar in family studies scholarly writings.

Families could include members who are related through generations of family ties and friendship, but not necessarily by blood, particularly for ethnic minorities (Savin-Williams, 1996). These could include persons who live together in a close-knit community and may have experienced and survived similar fates such as earthquakes or wars. They may have been forced to relocate or immigrate from their countries, and they continue to seek support from each other by maintaining contact or by building a new community together. Elders within these communities are often revered and included in important family decisions, becoming integral members of Jack’s family.

Families for lesbians and gay men can be equally complex, comprising members who are chosen as members and biologically related, such as partners, adopted or biological children, family-of-origin members and friends who perform functions similar to close biological families (Laird, 1996). “Families of choice” generally comprise individuals who provide support and who, together with the gay member, participate in family “rituals” around birthdays, couple unions, adoption, childbirth, retirement, and death that would otherwise go unnoticed.

Therefore, heterogeneity and diversity are important aspects of lesbian and gay male family structures (Allen & Demo, 1995). This study is designed to recognize the complexity of gay families, to give voice and credence to each member of Jack’s family and to contribute to knowledge about their family life. The study aims at revealing the process of the development of Jack’s family system and the cultural life of gay families after a member comes out. It is in relationships with families and kin networks, essential parts of cultural life, that we learn who we are and continually construct and re-construct ourselves (Laird, 1996). This study expands the
existing literature on Jack’s family to include they process within Jack’s family system and how individuals within a family change and contribute to the whole family’s coming out experience.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Research Method

Case Study

The aim of this research is to study a phenomenon within a context, to provide a holistic description, and to arrive at an understanding about participants, making it a process of insight, discovery, and interpretation (Merriam, 1998). To fully embrace the lives of individuals, an inductive research methodology that calls for observing and conversing (i.e., personal contact with participants) was utilized. Through such qualitative examination, subjectivity and socially constructed meanings receive in-depth understanding (Merriam, 1998). Case studies are ideal when holistic, in-depth investigation is needed (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991). Case studies facilitate examining the complex lives of individuals, and the impact on beliefs and decisions of the complex web of social interaction between individuals (Feagin et al., 1991). They also permit the study of the occupants of individual roles and how the definition of a role emerges out of interactions between role-occupants and other.

Creswell (1998) describes case studies as an exploration of a "bounded system," bounded by time and place, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context. This bounded system, or “unit of analysis,” to be studied is a family within the context of their coming out experience. Case studies are unique stories of events within unique systems in a context that is determined by the storytellers’ life - a life that features an ongoing process of declaring and maintaining an identity embedded within daily events and relationships.

Case studies are designed to bring out details from the viewpoints of participants, by focusing on socially constructed multiple realities that exist within Jack’s family system. This inductive, qualitative method of inquiry facilitates the task of capturing the multiple views of reality on the same experience, honoring the divergent views of participants. These experiences provide richness to the stories that can help create and understand Jack’s family tapestry while honoring divergence rather than mere convergence (Feagin et al., 1991).

Stories or narratives provide the dominant frame for life experience and for the organization and patterning of lived experience (Gergen, 1985). Lived experience is interpreted through these stories. There does not appear to be any other form of mechanism for the structuring of experience that so captures the lived time (Ricoeur, 1983) other than through
stories. Stories construct and impose meaning on the flow of memory, highlighting some and disposing others, making every story telling an interpretation by the storyteller. The focus is on the stories that determine directions in life, and in relationships. This case study honors one family’s unique stories around the coming out of a gay member, including the motivations, reactions, perceptions, beliefs, and hopes of each member and of Jack’s family as an entity. 

_Feminist Research_

The method of inquiry is informed by feminist research that emphasizes multiplicity, inclusivity, and plurality of voices and methods (Avis & Turner, 1995). Feminist research inquiry is inherently political and committed to work toward social change and liberation from oppressive ideologies (Rediger, 1995). Inquiry is further aimed at disrupting oppressive knowledge by analyzing both dominant and subjugated discourses. This is achieved with semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews, the main source of participants' narratives of their experience, have become the principal means by which feminists have sought to achieve the active involvement of their respondents in the construction of data about their lives (Bologh, 1984).

Open-ended questioning and gentle probes for deeper reflection is intended to create an atmosphere of trust, which allow interactional moments of insight to emerge from the experience. This phenomenological interviewing is described by some feminists as an participant-guided investigation of a lived experience that requires researcher skills of restraint and listening as well as participants who are verbal and reflective (Reinharz, 1992). Multiple interviews further characterize much of feminist research, as they help form the strong researcher-participant bonds (Reinharz, 1992). The researcher-participant rapport is intended to level the power hierarchy between the two, providing both equal power; the participant to relate their struggle and the researcher to make the overt covert by naming and punctuating their struggle.

The inclusion of quotations from interviews in the research report further allow participants to speak in their own voices and allow readers to experience participants’ perspectives more directly rather than through the eyes of the researcher (Avis & Turner, 1995). Participants who are the authorities on their own lives (Thompson, 1992) were asked to review the research report to ensure that the intended meaning is accurately captured.
Reflexivity

Reflexivity is the capacity of any system of signification to turn back upon itself, making the self the object of one’s observation (Lax, 1992). Reflexive conversations allow one to set aside one’s initial discourse and view it from a new perspective, creating a new discourse. Reflexivity is a way by which knowledge is constructed (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986), making it the main process by which the self is transformed in relation to knowledge (Allen & Farnsworth, 1993).

The use of reflexivity in this study elicits and allows multiple perspectives to be recognized and voiced. Participants were asked to reflect and comment on their personal stories shared in previous interview sessions and on the stories of other participants. Jack’s family interview provided an opportunity for participants to be reflexive in their interaction with other members. Personal narratives of others allowed participants to examine in a reflexive way issues about which they may have preconceived ideas (Allen & Farnsworth, 1993). For instance, the different meanings of diversity that unfolded in Jack’s family meeting provided an opportunity for participants to examine their personal bias while simultaneously reflecting on each other’s understanding of what diversity entailed. The process did not result in “one” definition of diversity but rather opened up the possibility for multiple meanings of diversity. The evolution from a “real” or an “objective” definition of diversity to possible “multiple” meanings of diversity, shows the potential of reflexivity as an agent that interrogates intellectual ideas with personal experience (Allen, 2000). Reflexivity reconnects the emotional and the rational as tools for generating contextualized knowledge (Du Bois, 1983; Kleinman & Copp, 1993; Krieger, 1991).

I similarly subjected myself to this reflexive process. I found that I was continuously developing insight by first passing it through my filter of self-knowledge and my constructions of self-in-relation to challenging observation. This process is cited by Allen (2000) as a strategy for improving scholarship, i.e., by embodying ourselves in our work. Discussions around the lack of openness in the Catholic Church towards gay individuals challenged the core of my personhood. As a Catholic who witnessed a fellow Catholic live in shame of his gay sexual orientation that he eventually died a closeted gay man (i.e., not out as gay), I struggle with my Catholic faith. I could relate to participants’ struggle with their Catholic faith, yet was consciously reminding myself to avoid naming Jack’s family’s struggle. Urging participants to
further reflect on their own struggle and on each other’s struggle with the Catholic faith helped me to not name their experience for them. This process of critically reflecting on the influence of my private experience and ideological commitments has the potential to infuse my work with vitality and credibility (Allen, 2000).

The use of reflexivity furthermore recovered knowledge about gay families that has been excluded or silenced by listening to participants’ privileged ways of knowing. The method is one of inclusivity that allows participants’ inner experiences to be taken seriously and voiced while simultaneously listening to the inner experiences of other participants. The exchange of perspectives using reflexive ways created a new process of thought and developed new discourses (Lax, 1992) for Jack’s family as a whole. Family conversations evolved to take on a collaboratively confrontational style (Collins, 1990) that challenged participants’ unnamed assumptions.

The application of reflexivity similarly challenged my ideas and feelings and deepened my perspectives of families (Allen, 2000) as I found myself in awe of the space and permission afforded to the younger participants to question and voice their opinions freely. Jack’s family’s respect of their members regardless of members’ age was encouraging yet unfamiliar to me due to my cultural background. While I intentionally stepped aside to observe the exchange of open dialogue among participants I could not help but reflect on the deprivation of a similar “space” in my culture that exemplified children who are “seen but not heard.” My “self” applauded and celebrated the freedom of expression in this family. I was also reminded of the pain of being “silenced.” This realization prompted my efforts to listen attentively to the voices of the younger members of Jack’s family and avoid taking the “expert” role that participants sought in me.

Role of the Researcher

My role is to mediate and assist participants in giving voice to their own thoughts and understanding to the events and circumstances in the larger context of their own lives. I facilitated the revealing of inner silences, best understood as mediating between those in power and those who are silenced and oppressed by that power (i.e., those who have been deprived of voice without their consent) (LeCompte, 1993). The revealing of inner silences has been the traditional perspective of critical and feminist researchers, as mediators between the powerful and the powerless. LeCompte also suggests that the power to name and describe this reality
reside first with those who have been silenced, a pre-requisite that transcends awareness and empowers the oppressed to engage in activism.

My style was reflexive and with appropriate cautions, self-revealing. My stance was of an “observer as participant.” As an “observer as participant,” I “observed and interacted closely enough with members to establish an insider’s identity without participating in those activities constituting the core of group membership” (Adler & Adler, 1994, p. 380). Participation was secondary to the role as information gatherer, information that was controlled by Jack’s family (Merriam, 1998). As “observer as participant,” I tried to facilitate an atmosphere of engagement and trust to allow participants to develop ideas, construct meaning, and share attitudes and feelings. The trust that was built elicited questions from participants that I wove into the study.

Developing trust called for my participation in Jack’s family’s conversations, some of which did not necessarily pertain to the study. I also joined in Jack’s family’s celebration of Natalie’s birthday on the day of Jack’s family interview. Participants were curious to know my story particularly around my heritage and my interest in this study. Their interest and my own feminist stance of inclusivity and self-disclosure led me to share with Jack’s family, an ethnic dish that I cooked and a tropical fruit common to my native country, Malaysia. Creating an environment that facilitates openness and engagement is a research methodology that strives for intimacy and includes self-disclosure. This practice is guided by a feminist ethic of commitment and egalitarianism (Reinharz, 1992). My self-disclosure helped the interview process to evolve and assume a more conversational character.

My professional role as a family therapist where I have been trained to listen, elicit clients' narratives, create a safe and accepting atmosphere, and participate in lived experiences also facilitated the interview process. It helped maintain both a level of connectedness and professionalism. I further adhered to the professional ethical codes that govern the conduct of family therapists, such as maintaining clients' confidentiality and to do no harm to clients, among other codes (AAMFT, 2001).

The clarification of information and the use of reflexivity helped me avoid drawing conclusions based on my own assumptions, particularly assumptions that I, as a family therapist, held about how families function. Moreover, as an ethnic minority (i.e. Eurasian) in my native country, Malaysia, I had to be cautious when drawing conclusions around Jack’s family’s sense of marginalization as gay. I was aware that while I may identify with the experience of feeling
marginalized, my experience which is of a different context may not reflect Jack’s family’s experience. Additionally, as a heterosexual whose interest in gay studies is prompted by anti-discrimination sentiments, I was knowingly aware to avoid passing judgment around issues of homonegativism. Self-monitoring exposed the study to continuous questioning and reevaluation, a practice that can increase the study’s credibility (Merriam, 1998).

Participants

Selection Process

The participants of this study were the fourth family that was approached and invited to participate. The first two families that were invited reside in Virginia. The gay member of these families was contacted through the Lesbian, Gay, Transgender and Bisexual Alliance of Virginia Tech. The third family approached was residents of Ohio. Participation of these families was elicited through their gay member, and on each occasion not more than two family members consented. As this would not have provided sufficient data for this study, the search for a family continued. At this time of the process, which was four months after IRB had approved this study, I had moved to New Hampshire. After three unsuccessful leads in New Hampshire and five months later, I decided to contact parents of gay individuals through the Parents and Friends of Lesbian and Gay (PFLAG) to search for participants. PFLAG was not the first choice, as I was attempting to avoid duplicating studies that included active PFLAG members. The challenge to elicit participation of families with gay individuals confirmed the difficulty in obtaining participation from parents of gay individuals who are not active PFLAG members.

Jack’s family

The participants in this study are comprised of Jack’s family-of-choice. (Participants’ names are not their real names. They are pseudonyms chosen by participants). It consists of Jack, 22 years of age, his parents, Natalie and Richard, both in their 50s, his sister Rebecca, 26 years of age, his teacher, Hal, in his 50s, and his best friend Catherine, 22 years of age. Jack’s family’s geneogram can be found in Appendix D. Jack’s family resides in a town of about 4000 residents in Southwest New Hampshire.

When PFLAG New Hampshire was contacted for this study, I was referred to Natalie. Natalie, who was enthusiastic and supportive, immediately offered her family as participants. After Natalie consulted with Jack, her gay son, and other members of her family and received their consent to participate in this study, I proceeded to contact Jack. After Jack was provided
with more information about this study, interviews were scheduled with Jack’s immediate family. After the first interview, it was evident that there were other individuals who were pertinent to Jack’s family’s coming out process and whom he thought was important for this study. An obvious person was Hal, the teacher to whom Jack first came out and who was “family” to Jack. When asked whom else Jack was out to, and whom he considered his “family,” he mentioned his best friend, Catherine, with whom he grew up with.

In his senior year of high school, Jack came out to Hal who, incidentally, is gay. Hal’s sexual orientation was however unknown to Jack when he came out to him. Hal naturally assumed a mentor role towards Jack. His invaluable resource to Jack’s family earned him status as a family member. Jack’s relationship with Catherine is best described by Jack, “Catherine is to me what Grace is to Will, on Will and Grace (a television sitcom). Catherine is my Grace.” The inclusion of members of Jack’s family-of-choice recognizes the value of differences and the pivotal role of a family’s primary support system.

Each member of Jack’s family was contacted for individual interviews. At the initial interview, each family member was provided with an “Informed Consent to Participate” form (Appendix B) that describes the study. Any questions family members had were also answered. Individual interviews were conducted with each family member after they gave their signed consent to participate.

Data Collection

In order to attain a complete picture of a family’s experience around coming out, personal narratives of each member of a family were elicited. Data were collected through multiple interviews, observations, and examining artifacts and relevant documents (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Multiple sources of data were used to ensure the gathering of rich, thick descriptions that give case studies their holistic characteristic. Interviews with family members were the main source of data. All interviews were face-to-face to facilitate and enhance the gathering of holistic narratives and descriptions that include both verbal and non-verbal information. Informant interviews allow data to be phrased in empirical categories of participants making them less abstract in addition to enhancing the credibility of data collected (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). My role as the only person conducting the interviews provided unfiltered data that also contributes to the credibility of the findings.
Interviews were semi-structured, using an initial interview guide (Appendix C) to elicit family members' narratives around their coming out experience and their meaning-making process over the years. Family members were guided with a minimum of direction in telling their stories, and encouraged deeper levels of reflection and analysis without limiting or restricting their focus. The semi-structured interview format used had the advantage of allowing family members to raise new issues and concerns that were not conceptualized initially as pertinent. The approach aimed at allowing space and time for family members to narrate their stories.

Interviews began with open-ended questions that were intended to provide a broad structure for family members' stories. As stories were elicited, further questions were developed using family members' own language to garner additional detail and clarification of their meanings and intent. The method of interviewing followed the language and the logic of family members' thought, with me asking further questions in order to clarify the meaning of a particular response (Gilligan, 1982). Multiple interviews allowed the opportunity to ask additional questions and to get corrective feedback on previously obtained information (Reinharz, 1992). Repeated observations and gathering data over a period of time (two and one half months) increases the study’s credibility (Merriam, 1998).

A total of 11 interviews with individual family members and one group interview with five family members were conducted. Interviews with individual family members ranged between one and one half hours and three and one half hours. The group interview with Jack’s family lasted for three and one half hours. The study took a total of 27.5 hours of face-to-face interview. All but three of the interviews were conducted in Natalie’s and Richard’s house (Appendix F). Jack’s second interview was conducted in his apartment and his third interview in his high school. Catherine’s interview was conducted in her apartment.

Observations of family members, their living arrangements, their surrounding neighborhood, and Jack’s high school added to the data collected. Observations in family members’ natural settings reflect their life experience more accurately than more contrived settings, hence enhancing the credibility of the study (LeCompte & Preissel, 1993). Observations of natural settings were made during interview sessions and directly after interview sessions after participants left the room. Descriptions of these different settings were maintained in the form of field notes, which includes descriptions of observations, researcher’s comments and direct quotations of family members (Merriam, 1998). Field notes were hand written partly during
observation and largely after observation. Additionally, physical artifacts and documents such as
electronic messages, photographs, and books helped illuminate Jack’s family's stories. Natalie
shared an electronic message that she had send to a newspaper column writer in response to the
writer’s opinions regarding the institution of marriage (Natalie, personal communication, January
5, 2000). Jack’s family also shared photographs from their vacation abroad, and some of Jack’s
and Rebecca’s high school photos. Six books and a video tape (Appendix G) that had
significance to Jack’s family in the initial stages of Jack’s family’s coming out process were part
of the documents of the study. Among Jack’s family’s keepsake literature was a magazine that
featured the main characters of Will and Grace on their cover (October 5, 2001, Entertainment
Weekly). I also snapped photographs of the physical settings of the interviews, and other
locations cited as pertinent to Jack’s family members such as the attic in the house and Jack’s
high school (Appendix F). These pictures were taken to provide readers a feel for what Jack’s
family’s life is like.

I transcribed verbatim interviews immediately after each interview. Information gathered
from initial interviews including both interview data and field notes, were used to direct future
interview sessions. The transcription of Jack’s family interview was proof read while
simultaneously watching the video recording of the same interview. The procedure helped ensure
that the data was matched with the correct person. It also enabled me to note family members’
body language and facial expressions. The information gathered prompted additional questions
to be added to the initial interview guide. Additionally, the use of reflexivity led me to ask family
members to reflect on information that had been gathered from another family member. To
facilitate the process of reflexivity and consistent with qualitative research, data were analyzed
(i.e., coded and themes identified) as data were collected (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Interviews
ceased when the data collected became repetitive, indicating the arrival of a point of saturation
where no new information was being gathered and when Jack’s family exhausted their stories
(Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Data Analysis

The analysis of data was informed by the theoretical frameworks of family systems and
social constructionism, the existing literature and the lack of literature on coming out and family
members, the research questions, my personal assumptions and skills as a qualitative researcher,
and the different types of data collected. Assistance in data analysis was sought from my
academic advisor in Virginia. It required numerous telephone conversations, electronic messages and the forwarding of data via both postal and electronic mail to and from the advisor.

Data were analyzed with the goal of constructing themes that capture some recurring pattern that cuts across the greater part (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984) of the data. These themes are concepts indicated by the data and were constructed through the constant comparative method of data analysis developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Comparative analysis helped to “tease out” the emerging themes by searching for its structure, temporality, cause, context, dimensions, consequences, and its relationship to other themes (Hutchinson, 1988).

Data were coded and analyzed simultaneously as and when data was collected. Insights gained and discoveries made during coding and data analysis informed subsequent data collection and continuing data analysis. Interviews were analyzed one at a time. Each interview was audio-taped, transcribed verbatim and proof read once while listening to the audiotape. After a minimum of two readings, I examined closely the transcribed data beginning with line-by line comparison, followed by paragraph-by paragraph comparison, and finally the whole document (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). The process of coding ensued by identifying and naming concepts that described or explained phenomena. These concepts were noted in the margin of the transcripts. Data that explained these concepts were highlighted in green. The sum of data collected produced a total of 182 concepts such as, negative reaction, need for privacy, and questioning religion. The concepts identified were compared with each other and those that pertained to the same phenomena, was grouped into themes using abstract terms (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) such as, social activism, and building community. In addition to analyzing the data for themes, features that specify each theme was also examined to increase its precision. Specific features of themes are sub-themes that describe properties, context, interactional strategies, and consequences of interactions of the phenomena within each theme (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Memo writing was used to record ideas and reflections that emerged from the data which were subsequently used to develop initial themes and sub-themes from each interview. Data that substantiated each sub-theme was highlighted with notation in the margin of the transcripts to facilitate future reference. Initially such data was cut out on strips of paper and put into file folders, one file folder per theme as recommended by Bogdan and Biklen (1998). As the amount of data increased and the handling of strips of paper became tedious, I proceeded to revert to the original electronic file and extracted the data from the original file and entered it into a new file.
that I created for each theme. Names given to themes and sub-themes for the most part used family members’ own words. The possible meanings of these themes and sub-themes identified guided the analysis process, and were validated in subsequent interviews with family members.

For example, the first interview conducted was with Natalie. In developing the theoretical memo for Natalie’s interview, eight initial themes were identified, each with their individual sub-themes. The eight themes were: (1) Social activism, (2) Negative reaction, (3) Selective disclosure, (4) Confronting homophobia, (5) Minority identity, (6) Change in family relationships, (7) Anticipating the second wave of coming out, and (8) The search for acceptance. The second interview conducted was with Rebecca. As the theoretical memo was developed for Rebecca’s interview, four themes were identified: (1) Negative reaction, (2) Increased family communication, (3) Struggle with religiosity and faith, and (4) Secrecy and discretion. When the themes and sub-themes of Natalie’s and Rebecca’s interviews were compared, similarities were found in themes 2, 3, and 4 of Natalie’s interview, and themes 1 and 4 of Rebecca’s interview. Selective disclosure to friends and extended family members was necessary as homophobia was acutely high in the initial stages after Jack came out. As homophobia was confronted and subsided as knowledge about gay culture increased, the reaction to the coming out progressed from shock and anger to acceptance. So it became evident that themes 2, 3, and 4 of Natalie’s interview and themes 1 and 4 of Rebecca’s interview were all part of the negative reaction hence collapsed into one theme, “Negative reaction.”

The same was found with themes 1 and 5 of Natalie’s interview. It was the realization of one’s new minority identity that brought about social awareness and encouraged social activism. Both these themes were hence collapsed into “Social activism.” Rebecca’s interview data did not add new themes but substantiated and confirmed themes identified from Natalie’s interview. Theme 2 of Rebecca’s interview was similar to theme 6 of Natalie’s interview, and theme 3 of Rebecca’s interview was similar to theme 8 of Natalie’s interview. Hence, the similarities found in the sub-themes and the increased abstraction of themes collapsed the initial eight themes to five: (1) Social activism, (2) Negative reaction, (3) Change in family relationships, (4) Anticipating the second wave of coming out, and (5) Searching for acceptance.

The process of constant comparison between themes and sub-themes was further applied to subsequent interview data, one interview at a time. A similar process of analysis was conducted with data from observations, field notes, artifacts and documents, and compared and
merged with the interview data. Field notes were hand-written and the pages were numbered for easy access. Pictures taken and documents were numbered as “Exhibits” (Appendix F & G). The constant comparison method of data analysis across different types of data, also known as triangulation reflects a fluid and flexible cyclical process which in turn ensured that the analysis is planned, and well-grounded in the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The process of triangulation contributes to the credibility and the dependability of the emerging themes.

Data collection ceased when saturation was achieved. Saturation is the point where no additional data can be found to develop properties of a theme and when properties of a theme are found to repeat themselves (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Saturation was achieved when all the data fit into the established themes and no new themes emerged from the data. The themes constructed had the following three essential characteristics: (1) they recur frequently in the data, (2) they link the data together, and (3) they explain much of the variation in the data (Sherman & Webb, 1988). Finally, after the analysis, as a form of member check, each family member was provided with the first draft that consisted of seven themes to review and provide feedback: (1) Accepting lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgenders (LGBT) in the community, (2) Being selective with gay identity disclosure, (3) Discussing related issues around sexual orientation, (4) Questioning personal and religious values, (5) Normalizing negative reaction experience, (6) Politicizing a personal stand, and (7) Identifying as an invisible minority. Member checks and peer examination are recommended tools that can enhance the credibility of the study (Merriam, 1998).

After receiving feedback from the member checks, the themes and sub-themes was reviewed with my advisor who served as the peer examiner. It was found that the seven themes could be further delimitated and saturated as underlying uniformities were evident in the sub-themes. This insight led me to return to the data to reanalyze the codes and themes that further collapsed the seven original themes to four themes that answered the research questions more precisely. The process of working with a peer examiner 300 miles away was a challenge as face-to-face interaction that has the potential to elicit more meaningful discussion was not possible. The input received, however, was invaluable as my advisor is both familiar and experienced with qualitative research methods. The challenge and questioning of my coding scheme led to its more cohesive storyline reflected in the final coding scheme (Appendix E). After the “Findings” in Chapter 4 were written up, a copy was provided to each family member for review and
feedback to further enhance the study’s credibility. Participants’ feedback was incorporated into the final paper.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Prelude: The Struggle to Come Out

Jack knew that the disclosure of his gay identity would impact the relationships within his family. He was cautious as to when and to whom he came out. He asked himself:

How can I do this for my family without making anyone feeling fully uncomfortable or ruining our great family relationship? Like how can I do this, make this big step for the three other people in my family without ruining anything? ‘Cause I know once I say those words, you can’t take that back.

Jack spent months preparing to come out to his sister and parents. With the help of Hal, a teacher to whom he first came out, and his best friend Catherine, who knew soon after Hal knew, Jack devised a plan to disclose his sexual orientation to his family-of-origin. He chose to first come out to his sister and then four months after that, to his parents. Jack took six months after first coming out to Hal, to prepare himself to come out to his parents. Although Jack knew that his parents would accept him, he was nevertheless cautious and waited to move out of their house before coming out to them.

Jack was elated that he finally divulged the secret that he had kept for more than 10 years. Jack described those agonizing years:

I kept it a secret because it was okay inside of me, but it wasn’t okay enough for me to share it with anyone yet. So no, I didn’t tell anybody, not even my best friend. It was hard, really hard. It… is something you keep in the bottom of your stomach, the deepest, dark pit of your stomach. This tiny secret that you’ll never tell anyone and it does a lot of wear and tear on a seven-year-old, or an eight-year-old to have this dying secret.

Jack’s coming out to himself took many years of struggle as he explained:

I was kind of in denial for a couple of years through middle school, and I had a couple of crushes on other guys. I didn’t really know if I could be bisexual or not. “Okay, alright, I’m half normal, I’m half straight.”… for a couple of years… I was pretty content that well, “Okay, I could have a girlfriend down the road in high school, but I seem to really like guys. But I don’t know if the girlfriend thing will work out so we’re going to keep that as an option,” you know, to be safe. But I was probably 14 or 15 years old (italics added) when I really was like, “Okay Jack, you’re gay; you’re going to deal with it.” Like when I was beginning high school… I remember thinking… that people might start
finding out my secret, and still haven’t told anyone. I was really scared about that… I had a lot of anxiety.

The struggle finally ended when Jack came out to the people that meant the most to him. The relief of telling the truth helped Jack redeem his sense of self and freedom:

It was probably the hardest thing I have ever done in my life. Seriously it was so…. difficult, but I had the courage, and I did it. And it was the best thing ever. Some of my friends now still haven’t told their parents…. It made me the person I am today. For me, it has only gotten me stronger.

Despite being as prepared and cautious as he was, Jack had no control over his family members’ reaction. When Jack came out to his family, they reacted. They were shocked. There was confusion. Each member of Jack’s family plunged into a process of change as they sought to understand Jack and their new identity. It was a painful journey for most, but they emerged from their process with more understanding and tolerance for gay individuals and gay culture, in addition to a keen sense of solidarity of the human race. To illustrate Jack’s family’s process of adaptation following his coming out, the following four themes that emerged from the analysis of data will be elaborated: (1) Embracing gay identity, (2) Integrating as a family, (3) Building social networks, and (4) Social awakening.

Family in this section is used to refer to Jack’s family-of-choice that consists of Jack’s family-of-origin, Hal and Catherine. Family-of-origin consists of Jack’s parents and sister.

Embracing Gay Identity

Prior to Jack’s coming out, the bulk of Jack’s family had not had any experience with the gay community or gay culture; at least none about which they were conscious. The exception was Hal, who as a gay man himself, was an active advocate in the gay community. Jack’s coming out was the catalyst that motivated the rest of Jack’s family’s investigation into the nature of gay culture and the gay community. Each member began a personal coming out journey as they came to terms with Jack’s gay identity as well as their own identity as a member of a family with a gay member.

This theme captures the essence of Jack’s family’s process as each member embarks on their personal coming out journey of emotional turmoil and reconciliation. Members’ personal journeys helped them embrace gay culture as they overcame their homonegativity and learned about gay culture.
**Overcoming Homonegativity**

Jack’s coming out threw his family into an emotional turmoil that lasted for approximately six months, “I was distraught over this scenario (referring to Jack’s coming out) for months,” shared Rebecca. “The first six months was very hard. After about four to five months, I started calming down. A lot of sleepless nights. I just, I was saying to myself, ‘Why me? Why me?’” exclaimed Richard. The months that followed Jack’s coming out was a stressful time for Jack’s family as each member needed time to process the “news.” Natalie explained:

I think gay people need to understand they have to give their parents time to process all this information. They have thought about it, the gay person a long time before they made the decision hopefully with good information to tell your parent or your siblings, but they can’t expect us overnight to understand. We need time, and sometimes we need to step back, and I think Jack was anxious. Two days after that, “So well, what do you think? (Jack asked).” And I said, “Well, we just need some time.”

The time was needed to cope with the emotional turmoil, to fully decipher the “news” and “simmer” down. The initial reaction of most members was shock and confusion. Their reaction was almost unanimous despite being forewarned or having had suspicions that Jack was gay. Jack’s coming out sent shock waves throughout Jack’s family. Natalie described her reaction:

*An acquaintance* (italics added) had mentioned that he (Jack) could be, could not be gay. So knowing ahead of time, I cried ahead of time. So I was a little bit prepared, but to hear those real words, “Mom, dad, I’m gay,” it just it put everything into slow motion. I just remember that we had just finished eating dinner at his (Jack’s) place, and I just slowed down and so, “He really is.” The time perceptions just changes. I still remember thinking, “Oh, wow.” I mean, I don’t think there was any depth of what it meant for him being gay, just that he said these words, that he really is gay. That (expressed shock) and I think it was kind of being in shock a little bit.

Family members who noticed that Jack was “different” and had thought that he might be gay, were similarly taken by surprise. Richard explained in metaphorical terms:

The average family is like finding out that someone has cancer. It was just a real shock you know….I was very devastated. It was 30 September 1999….I will never forget. That
night I was like I was stabbed with a knife. It was very tough.....we saw things as he grew up that was different. But once you hear it (laughs) it’s like. It’s the real thing.

There was also confusion as members tried to process their reactions. Rebecca shared her reaction:

Disappointment, I felt anger and disappointment. Those were my initial feelings. I felt very disappointed, and it’s not even disappointed. Disappointment isn’t really the feeling. I think it was more uncertainty and anger. It was like, “Why is it?”

Amidst the initial reactions of shock and confusion there was also a sense of relief – relief from knowing and confirming who Jack was. Catherine explained:

It was a shock. It was definitely a big surprise when I found out. Things kind of made sense when he told me you know -- why he never really had too much of an interest in women.

As the news sank in, family members’ attempts to decipher “gay identity” thrust them into a state of further confusion and resistance. Most of their negative reactions appear to stem from family member’s homonegativity (i.e., negative feelings, attitudes, and behaviors toward those with same-sex attractions) as evident in their struggle to match Jack to what they knew of gay culture. Images of gay that came to mind were largely negative and upsetting. Rebecca explained:

I had initial images of what it means to be gay, and all that came to mind. The pictures that came to my mind were sexual images of two people of the same gender making love. And I guess that’s maybe where the uncertain stems from, and I didn’t perceive a relationship, a gay relationship as like…having a friend component, having an emotional component, communicative component. The first images in my head were gay sexual images.

Natalie reacted similarly when she began to seek information about gay culture, “The last thing I wanted was anything visual,” referring to her discomfort with gay intimacy.

While most family members revealed their homonegativity in their reaction to the “news,” Richard, who was in the military and was raised in an era that psychopathologized gay, readily admitted his homonegativity:

Being a traditional heterosexual male, I guess I was homophobic (i.e., having irrational and distorted views of homosexuality which is commonly manifested as prejudice or
general discomfort with homosexuality) when I grew up. I was never ever disrespectful to anyone...no matter what their religion, or sex or whatever, color of their skin. But you may not associate with them.

Richard was further challenged when he found himself recalling and regretting the times that he may have made jokes about gays in the presence of Jack as Jack was discovering his gay identity. Richard explained with regret in his voice:

I probably would have said things that now I would regret saying. I may have made a joke about gays as he grew up. I have no idea. Natalie was equally remorseful for any similar possibility.

The tendency to focus on oneself was also shared by other family members. They were concerned of the effect Jack’s gay identity had on them. Their concerns ranged from fear for self to fear of their future. Rebecca explained:

I kind of took a lot of like self-concern, I was thinking more of myself. And thinking, “Oh, what will my friends think about this?” because the word gay is not acceptable. That is, people shun away of those kinds of individuals: lesbians, gays. They are uncertain about that lifestyle. And some people have preconceived images of what that lifestyle entails, what that lifestyle means, what those people do everyday....I was very concern about what my friends would say especially in future personal relationships. Would this person want to continue to have a long term relationship with me if he knows that my close family member is gay? How will that person be, feel a part of our family if he doesn’t relate to us, appreciate a gay lifestyle? And that was my biggest fear.

Family members’ discomfort led them to feel a need to be discreet and secretive to maintain their privacy. Their need stemmed from the fear of being ostracized, judged, and to protect themselves. Natalie shared the challenge she faced in ensuring privacy:

I remember the first time in Borders trying to find...two (gay related) books...and I finally went over to the sports category to find the section and I wasn’t going to ask where it was. I was going to find it myself. One of Jack’s friends...came over and said hello to me. I’m like, “Is he reading my piece of paper or was he looking at what I was looking at?” Well he didn’t....And now I am more comfortable being in that section but I still look around in the section and I am aware that I am in that section more than in other sections and wonder what other people are thinking about me.
Besides feeling shock, confusion, discomfort, regret and self-concern, Jack believed that his parents were in denial of his gay sexual orientation:

I think both (referring to Natalie and Richard) of them at first were really reluctant that this (gay identity) was actually a reality. I think both of them thought that maybe this was something that I would grow out of -- a phase so to speak. The denial caused Natalie to feel anger at the pain her son endured and was going to endure. Her anger was displaced to the people around her and to those she thought caused her son to be gay. Jack explained:

She (Natalie) pointed her fingers to people who didn’t have anything to do with it…like other parts of my life, just because she didn’t know enough yet.

The emotional turmoil that family members experienced slowly dissipated as they took time to seek answers to their questions. Their initial reaction was a combination of negative feelings towards gay individuals and gay culture per se, and personal discomfort with having a gay family member. The feelings evolved to regret and empathy for Jack and the challenges that he faced as family members began to realize the path that awaited Jack. Their realization and concern for Jack turned their focus onto Jack. Catherine expressed her concerns:

I worried about him as a person because I know how hard it can be for gay males particularly in society today. I was just worried about him. We come from a small town. And small towns aren’t great with dealing with issues. I was kind of afraid mostly of people in our school somehow finding out and harassing him. I care about him so much I would never want to see anyone saying to him that will be hurtful.

Catherine continued to share her observation of other family members’ reactions:

I remember a lot about his mom (Natalie). I remember her crying and being kind of upset but not so much that he was gay, it was more kind of like she…like how I was. She was worried for him and felt bad that he had bottled it up for so long, you know what I mean? Like I felt kind of like his mom felt, like so mad for him. Like I couldn’t imagine him bottling it up like that and having to go through adolescence and growing up and stuff and not having anyone to talk to.

Natalie elaborated:

It is still this mother part of me that we’re the ones who always fix things, we’re the ones who always want to be there for our kids and it is this little pain in my heart that I...he
doesn’t share this with me, but I know that there has to be times when he was probably in his room and feeling these feelings and not knowing what to do with it and feeling sad and not being aware of it….I wanted to be there for him and fix everything and make it right….Yes, it makes me sad. That a part of him struggling with this all the years that he did.

Jack was moved by his family members’ concerns for him. He said appreciatively:

She (Rebecca) thought of Matthew Sheppard and she was really worried that I will have a difficult time and lead a really rough life.

Concern for Jack’s safety was also shared by Richard who is familiar with fire arms. Richard offered to teach Jack the use of weapons as a form of protection.

The process from the initial reaction to empathy for Jack led family members to take a less homonegative view of gays and negate stereotypical beliefs promoted about gay individuals and gay culture. Additionally, family members’ realization of the authenticity of gay identity played a major role in their ability to accept Jack as a gay man. During Jack’s family interview, Jack was asked how he knew that he was gay. Natalie’s explanation reflects her journey from denial to acceptance:

And the more I got involved in information, reading stories, it (being gay) is just something that is deep inside you that you can’t stop your feelings. You can’t change the way you feel. You don’t have to jump in bed with some female to figure out if you are a guy who likes guys. It is just like you have a special attraction to the opposite sex. It is deep inside of you. You are who you are.

She explained that she realized that her process was necessary:

I think it was just part of the process of moving to a point of complete acceptance, you have to go through these stages.

Natalie also attributed her journey to accepting Jack’s gay identity and her identity as a parent of a gay man to her own becoming as a person:

It does make you dig deeper into yourself. I mean I felt like especially the first six months in processing all this, you really do strip down to your soul. It’s like, it makes you reflect on things that maybe you don’t really want to reflect on. …you just have to come to terms with things….this added a big change in my life -- who my son is, who I am as a
person….And you just have to find that balance and be who I am, Natalie, mother of Jack who happens to be gay.

Other family members also expressed the change in their ability to embrace Jack as who he truly is. Richard, who had initiated family therapy for Jack’s family found that therapy helped him realize what Jack meant to him as a person:

Natalie and I both went to therapy. He (the therapist) was very professional, very helpful, he made us realize that Jack is who he is…. He just brought out a lot of good things. He would let us talk and then he would add things.

Rebecca’s journey to acceptance brought her to a point where she feels relaxed and comfortable with the gay identity:

I guess I feel better about it now. I don’t feel like I have to shout it out to the world, but I don’t feel I have to be secretive anymore. I don’t feel that it is a thing to feel ashamed about….I feel a little more comfortable with him (Jack) spending time with people his own age and little bit more comfortable with his interest or his attraction. I have been a little more humorous, because I feel more comfortable about what it (gay) means.

She attributed her ability to stretch beyond herself to embrace Jack to her unsheltered life when growing up that made learning to accept differences and uniqueness more possible.

Hal, who served as a resource to the Jack’s parents and sister, was also somewhat surprised. He was both surprised and honored that Jack chose him to first come out to. Hal’s concerns were mainly around providing Jack with information that would help him better integrate and accept his sexuality. Hal elaborated on his role as mentor to Jack after reviewing a draft of this chapter:

We (Jack and Hal) worked together to anticipate what the experience of coming out to his parents might be like and was he prepared to answer their questions honestly and in an informed way. Prior to coming out to me, Jack had no up-to-date written material or real-life experience from gay people he trusted. Jack had this learning curve he had to accomplish before he approached his parents (Hal, personal communication, Hal, September 2, 2002).

Seeking Information on Gay Culture

The process of moving from their initial negative reaction to an ability to embrace gay culture was largely due to the concerted effort of each member to seek information on gay
culture. The information they sought contributed to their knowledge and comfort with gay culture. Information was gathered from participation in the Parents and Friends of Lesbian and Gays (PFLAG) meetings, literature shared among family members and obtained from the PFLAG library, lectures, and media’s portrayal of gays in television series, movies and independent films. The education acquired by family members helped them accept Jack as gay and helped them accept their identity as a member of a family with a gay individual.

Jack’s family cited their involvement with PFLAG as one of the most crucial resources that helped them open the doors to the gay community. It was this door to the gay community that allowed Jack’s family to learn about gay culture and demystify and negate numerous preconceived ideas about gay culture. The people Jack’s family met through PFLAG played a significant role in helping Jack’s family understand gay culture. Natalie shared:

I would attend meetings, and my husband came when he could, and the kids both came when they were free….the support (of) people who were there, there were a lot of parents. There were gay people there, some gay men which was nice….for me to see that every male doesn’t get AIDS and die….what is wonderful is to meet couples, stable couples who have been in long relationships, and now I am starting to meet a few couples who have kids, who have babies and who have children which I think is great.

Richard also found meeting other parents of gay individuals valuable as it helped him situate himself in his process as he identified with the struggles of other parents:

We met this wonderful family who had a gay son and we started meeting people that were finding out about their kids. Some people had a really, really hard time. We met a couple who found out that their daughter was gay….They had dreams of children and everything…the husband….They were crushed.

Getting to know gay and lesbian colleagues and acquaintances better similarly contributed to member’s comfort with gay individuals. Rebecca found her interactions with a gay colleague a positive experience as it allowed her to understand gay men:

This man that I work with is my age, and he is gay, and he has a great personality and very humorous and outgoing, and…he has got a lot of confidence in himself and what he believes in. And just working along side him has given me a good feeling and respect for, for gay people.
Besides the physical contact and interaction with gay individuals, gay-related literature also served a major role in improving Jack’s family’s familiarity with gay culture. Natalie found that she “learned an awful lot of information from reading a lot of books.” The ability to identify with the material she read helped her come to terms with her struggle. Learning of other parents’ reaction helped her normalize her own reaction:

Just being able to read the stories, and hear parents go through the same kinds of feeling that I was feeling then. Okay, this is alright. How do I tone down?

The reading was, however, not always pleasant. The literature would sometimes overwhelm Natalie, especially when it spoke about pain and suffering. It took time to be able to read without censorship as she explained:

In the beginning…I just couldn’t even I would start to read stuff about AIDS, but I just couldn’t go there. The thought was so debilitating, suffering and all these people that has died from it. Since then I have read a lot of stuff on it. I had one more thing and then move on to something else (referring to the overwhelming nature of tragedies).

The literature that Jack’s family read served as a basis of questions for Jack that helped them better understand him. Rebecca who had read an autobiography of a gay man found that she was able to relate to Jack’s experience as a gay man through the author’s story. She explained how her reading helped her:

It wasn’t only like years later that when Jack and I were talking more comfortably, you know, after he came out to me that I reflected back on…some of Greg Louganis’s personal experiences….it was his autobiography….his story, like his lifestyle, people he encountered, boyfriends, and different past that he had. So, yes, I asked my brother questions based on that information, based on his story.

Gay-related literature that Jack’s family read was mostly up-to-date and current, facilitating Jack’s family’s journey. Such literature was also the resource for Jack as he grew to discover his gay identity. Unfortunately for Jack, he ran into some rather dated material that degraded gay culture. Jack talks about the days as a curious teenager that he would spend in Jack’s family’s attic crouched between storage boxes (Appendix F) and bend over reading a book he had found among his mother’s possessions:

Well, before I had enough courage to come out, I did a lot more reading. And I found an attic, (laughs), I found a book up in our attic. . There were a couple of chapters about gay
culture and gay men, and I couldn’t relate to these chapters at all. These stories seem really interesting, and I wanted to like get to know about this, but I couldn’t relate to it at all. The information seem so negative, it was so bad. It was (when) gay was still considered a mental illness. So the whole book was just like bad mouthing gay people. They are these species of the human race that is inferior -- gay people. And I just like tossed the book out and then maybe just a couple months later, I remember finding the book again and looking at the copyright, “Okay Jack, this makes sense now.” I put the two and two together, and that this is just old information. This isn’t like, this isn’t such a bad thing, you know. It made me feel really bad about myself.

Of all the literature that Jack’s family read, they were most comfortable with books. Audio-visual information was not an option in the beginning phases of coming out. Jack’s family welcomed audio-visual information after they became more comfortable with their identity as a member of a family with a gay member and felt safe to be seen with gay-related audio-visual material. Their discomfort was also shared by Jack as he explained:

I felt more comfortable getting a book out from the library or borrowing from someone than renting a gay video and worrying about like playing the video somewhere or like watching a movie or listening to a tape. So books were safer for me (chuckles).

Rebecca also shared Jack’s discomfort with being found with gay-related material and did not bring any material back to her college dormitory:

But I didn’t bring any information back to my dorm for fear that someone would look through it or find it laying out. I basically kept my literature at home….I was acting secretive for a few months.

Gay related lectures and seminars on college campuses and in the community also served as valuable sources of information for Rebecca and Natalie. Media was yet another source of information that helped Jack’s family become more familiar with gay culture and the struggles that accompany being out as a gay. Will and Grace, a weekly television sitcom was of particular significance for Natalie and Rebecca. The show apparently instilled hope in Natalie:

Will and Grace was very significant in the beginning. I watched that every week. I said, “This is awesome. This could be my son.” I could see my son being the attorney, the three piece suit. And even though it is comical and the more I started learning, some of this is not typical in gay relationship, it was very helpful.
For Rebecca, the show opened a window into gay intimacy:

Will and Grace -- that gave me new insight. Just their relationships as young adults, and the guy’s like interests... it’s getting me more familiar with a man’s feelings, and his feelings towards people of the same sex.

Movies in general appear to have left lasting impression on viewers. Richard, for instance, found that to his surprise, he began to recall gay themed movies that he had seen in the past and realized that his discomfort at that time was a reflection of his degree of homonegativity. He exclaimed:

I remembered the movie! Something in my mind came back. It was a movie that I pretty much disliked at the time I watched it.

The movie, however, served as educational as Richard explained:

I saw a movie, just a television show so it was probably about one to two hours long, and this father was going through hell trying to accept that his son was gay....I would just laugh at it now, because I think ... I was actually uncomfortable watching that movie. But every time they do show something like that, it gives it, the public, a little better understanding. They might not understand all the way but they may see different sides, and I think that a lot of times people see gays as these perverts who have sexual orgies that are disgusting to any heterosexual. It is certainly not that way.

Independent films were also a source of media influence that helped family members feel more comfortable with gay intimacy. Catherine, who watched two such movies at the invitation of Jack, explained:

Independent gay films -- just different; not use to seeing men holding hands on television (laughs). Really, which I mean I am okay with. I mean it helped to see, yes. And I know it helped Jack I think too. It’s nice. It must be nice to see a film about this.

Current television programs were also cited by Natalie as a useful medium that could educate about gay culture:

I think what’s nice is that there is a lot of things in the media. It is bringing up conversations with people about gay. The program that was on this week about gay adoption and it’s talking about gay people. But it is talking about those kids that need homes that if we don’t be open about gay adoption. I definitely feel that the media has made the public more aware that there are gay people out there.
Visiting gay communities was another thing that helped Jack embrace his sexuality with more confidence and assurance. A trip he took in high school to Provincetown, Massachusetts, (or fondly known as “P” town to locals) a predominantly gay community, provided him with a glimmer of hope for a future as an open gay man:

I went to Provincetown for the first time, and like I didn’t meet, but noticed a lot of other people holding hands on the street, and just like, like a gay playground. That year after my junior year (in high school) was very important, I went with some of my friends to “P” town, and they didn’t, none of us had come out to each other, but a couple of us in the group were gay. There was a lesbian couple, and they were all friends of mine who I worked with. We just had the greatest weekend and I finally felt that I was free. And then going into my senior year wouldn’t be such a bad feeling because this was on the other side now. And after I graduate, maybe I can live with one of these people in “P” town and be really comfortable. You don’t have to worry about what other people think.

The combination of literature, lectures, the gay community and media’s representation of gay culture were resources that proved useful for Jack’s family. These resources assisted Jack’s family to progress to the point where they were able to embrace Jack as who he is-- a gay man. Hal, a keen supporter to Jack’s family, adds what he believes to be Jack’s parents’ impetus to accepting Jack as their gay son:

It was the environment, the visual environment that Richard and Natalie was seeing swirling around their son and that they may have had negative thoughts, but everything they saw was positive. So whatever they may have been thinking, they may have just purged those questions because there was simply no evidence of the reality.

Integrating as a Family

Jack’s coming out led to a quantitative and a qualitative change in his family. The quantitative change saw an expansion of Jack’s family from a four member family-of-origin to a six member family-of-choice with the inclusion of Hal and Catherine. Both Hal and Catherine were instrumental in encouraging Jack in his coming out process. Their significance in Jack’s life opened the door to their membership in Jack’s family. The qualitative change is evident from the increased bonding in Jack’s family as Jack’s family transformed itself into a more communicative unit.
This theme illuminates the effect of Jack’s coming out on family members’ as Jack’s family becomes more integrated and bonded as a unit. The increased bonding among family members is evident as the quality of their interactions improved over time. Jack’s family’s improved interpersonal relationships also led to more open communication among family members.

*The Bonding of Jack’s Family*

Family member’s individual coming out process naturally affected their interaction with other family members. The processes caused strain in family relationships before progressively improving as Jack’s family bonded. Most of Jack’s family’s bonding was a result of their sharing and conversing about their coming out struggle with each other. Although members mutual sharing often meant a period of initial distance from each other, the conversations did not end. Instead, conversations evolved as members risked sharing, revealing and enquiring. Jack shared the early conversations he had with Rebecca and how their relationship ebbed between closeness and distancing:

I started to tell her (Rebecca) that I was willing to provide her with more information and we started talking and we became really close the next couple of weeks (after Jack came out to Rebecca). And she told me a little bit about herself, and a little bit about her friends. She had a lot of questions. And she became a little distance from me for awhile, for even a month or two and that was really weird….we would talk, but we would never really talk about me being gay anymore. And I would open up to her…“Rebecca what do you think? What do you think about me?...How do you feel about this?” And she was like, “I don’t know. I don’t know.”

We were out like washing her car in the driveway one day and really nice sunny day and I brought it up again. We hadn’t talked about it for a couple of days, or a week had gone by and I was like, “Do you have anything to say to me? Do you have any questions?” And she was just so distant. And it wasn’t like that conversation we had the first night. Like I could see her thinking, like the wheels turning in her head and she really needed to find some answers, and I guess I wasn’t the person to get answers from and I couldn’t be that person for her and it made me really sad because I wanted this to work out really well and it wasn’t going how I had planned (disappointment in Jack’s voice).
Jack’s tone changed to possibility when he spoke of his current relationship with Rebecca where the two siblings find commonality in their young adult lives:

I think that over the past two to three years now since I told her (Rebecca), things are getting easier for her but we both (are) at that time of our lives (where) we’re dating people and falling in and out of love. We have a lot of things in common that we can talk to each other about. We are both really mature and really close to each other that it’s kind of a non-issue for her I think now. I don’t see in the future her having difficulty with me and my role in Jack’s family. So that was very mature of her and made me feel really well that even though that I was dealing with this, she can put her life aside and give me the time. That, and space I need. But also be able to openly communicate with me.

Rebecca, on the other hand, found that she needed the support of her entire family for her to accept Jack and his true identity. She shared her process that helped her to be more accepting:

We (Jack’s family) needed to reunite, we needed to get together, and I needed to see,

“Okay, my brother has grown up over the years, and this is what he has been feeling and this is information that he has learned about this gay culture you know, and this (gay) lifestyle, and just being there (part of the gay culture) almost felt like, it’s not a bad thing. I don’t feel any differently towards my brother. I feel happier that he feels very content with himself and he is very self-actualized and self-assured, and comfortable with his image and the things that he enjoys doing.

Similarly, Jack had conversations with his other family members that helped him feel accepted by his family. He had found an early conversation with Richard reassuring:

My dad and I were outside one day, and it was only a couple of weeks after I had told them (Natalie and Richard)….I came home thinking, “Okay, this is great, I just told my parents. Everything is going to be peachy,” and everybody is going to be like, “We love you, Jack.” I came home and like they were both very quiet, and everything wasn’t a hundred percent gay and this is great. Both of them had a lot of questions, this was only a couple of weeks after I had told them. My dad was working on the roof and I was helping him. He was on a ladder out front and he said, “You know, Jack, I don’t understand, I don’t understand “it” at all, but I’m really proud of you for telling us, for having the courage to tell us and I am going to try to do my best to learn about gay people.” And he said, “You are going to have a very tough life. It’s going to be really hard for you. I just
want you to know that this isn’t going to be the easiest path for you.” And of course I answered, “I know that. That I know. I have been thinking about this for a long time. It’s not like its something new like popped into my head Surprise!” So it was good that we even exchanged those few phrases together because he needed to know where I was, and I needed to know where he was in this whole process. So that was really good.

Relational strain was not reserved to Jack’s relationship with his family. Both Natalie and Richard felt a strain on their couple relationship and they each spoke about the strain. Richard explained with melancholy:

Natalie and I kind of split apart. We just don’t seem… and now it is coming around. We seem to be getting closer. She went through some very tough time. She was just very, very angry. There was something that happened with Jack that I don’t know if she is being over-protective or she is frustrated, it almost seem like she’s frustrated…. It’s been really tough. I think she was mad at me in the way I didn’t accept it (Jack’s gay identity) the way she did. I think she was mad at people that may say something jokingly.

Natalie also noticed changes in her relationship with Richard:

I think my husband and I were kind of apart from one another, but this has started to bring us closer together too. It was threatening I believe for him to see me jump so much into this and wanting to do something to educate people.

Family members’ respect for each other helped them bond and remain close and supportive. Natalie and Richard handled Jack’s coming out rather differently, and it was their support for one another that helped them weather the storm. Natalie shared her appreciation for Richard’s initiative in seeking out resources for them after Jack came out:

Just the instigating that Richard suggested that we do counseling. That, and that he made the first call to the support person of the PFLAG. I was surprised at that too. Maybe that was his way of having to deal with this. To do something because I’m usually the one who would pick up the phone and organize.

Some relationships within Jack’s family did not experience strain but rather grew closer from the start. Such was Natalie’s and Jack’s relationship. Natalie described her relationship with Jack:

I say that this is a gift -- my son telling me that he is gay, because I am able to understand the depth of some of his feelings that a lot of parents don’t have that closeness with their
kids that they aren’t able to express it when there isn’t an opportunity that comes up. And maybe it has to do with who Jack is anyway. But to understand the strength and the depth of those feelings is something very precious and it brings us closer together. And I think Jack and I have that more than I have with any other member of my family.

She continued to describe the bonding within her family and attributed Jack’s age as a possible reason for Jack’s family’s struggle with acceptance:

It’s all part of the, the enrichment part of us…yes, it was painful in the beginning. I think it was because I didn’t realize how strong our family was. But this has helped us grow more, be closer even though we are not all living in the same house anymore we still have that bond and that togetherness. I think a lot of it has to do with how close our family is and Jack’s age. I know that if he was 25 or 30 years old (italics added) and in his job, it would have made the dynamics different (less reactive).

The extent of Jack’s family bonding was also observed by both Hal and Catherine who each played an integral role in Jack’s family’s bonding process. Catherine described her feelings and observations:

Right now, I think better than ever (referring to Jack’s family’s relationship)….In the beginning I was a little worried…because I knew that his mom at first was like skeptical about it and then took a really big role and really started participating in PFLAG and everything. So that was good. I was happy for her. His dad I was a little concerned about because he kept more quiet and didn’t say too much about it. Rebecca, I was a little concerned about as well….Cause I think she had a lot of questions and she was confused about it. Also I think she was avoiding it like wouldn’t talk about it that much in the beginning. And I just tried to talk to her as best as possible that I could. I could tell her that I was scared for him too…. But I think they really pulled together as a family I hope….they’ve all done well with each other. But definitely I think they are dealing with it.

Hal, who openly shares his personal journey in life as he questions the meaning and role that he plays in Jack’s life as his mentor, especially contributed to Jack’s family’s cohesiveness. Sharing the meaning that Jack has brought into his life provides Jack’s family with a sense of mission as they realize that they too have a role in “giving” to Hal. Hal, who continues to play a keen role in Jack’s family’s bonding process, echoed Catherine’s observations:
Maybe since (Jack’s coming out) it’s (Jack’s family) been driven by a more inclusive spirit whereas in the past it was just getting things done. There is more making sure that all the parts come together on this. If I say something, it is very important that everybody else in Jack’s family knows what I have to say, what my feeling is on something. There has been a qualitative change. A qualitative change….things are much more a solution of a whole family issue as oppose to a solution to a particular itemized subject.

Hal continues to try to understand the process and catalyst for change among Jack’s family-of-origin and offered his perception of Jack’s family’s process,

Here is something in life that we have completely missed out in. We didn’t know anything about Jack. If we can miss something like that – Jack, perhaps we can miss other things. So maybe we should just go about things a little differently.

Natalie agreed that Jack’s family would not have abandoned Jack but rather supported him as they do today:

Like there is no way Jack would be out (excluded from) of Jack’s family with this information. I was opened up for whatever I needed to know to understand and to be at another point of acceptance. Some families I just don’t think they can do it, and it is a family dilemma I’m sure.

Jack’s parents’ support for him as a person was also evident when they expressed their love for him without hesitation when he had come out to them. Catherine explained:

I remember at one time when he did come out I forgot to say before that his parents, both of his parents said, “We love you. We will always love you. This doesn’t change our love for you.” That was good. I was really glad that he heard that from them because it is important to hear from your parents. It is reassuring.

*Sharing Multiple Realities*

The thirst and the curiosity about gay identity was the impetus for many family conversations that bonded Jack’s family together. Debates and discussions were not reserved for gay related topics, but broadened to include a myriad of social issues. It opened the gateway for family members to explore the extent of voice and power they had in their family.

While gay-related topics sat comfortably with some family members, Jack tried preventing it from upsetting his family life. He was careful to consider the level of comfort of individual family members and responded appropriately. Jack explained that his parents
processed their experiences differently, and he was concerned that his father, who was less vocal, would be upset by his mother who tends to verbally processes information:

He’s (Richard) very accepting of other people and other minorities, but he also had a lot to learn which I found out after coming out to him. Because he grew up in an era where gay people weren’t equal with himself and his friends and he had all these preconceived notion of what a gay man was and what a lesbian was. It made it really difficult for him. It was hard for him to understand his son could be gay, and how he can form a life for himself with his opinions? How could he ever make anything of himself? He is going to be stamped on. He is going to be the butt of jokes, you know. So I knew that this was all a part of my dad’s background. So I was very sensitive whenever we would talk about things.

Jack’s sensitivity led him to play an intermediary role with the intention of maintaining Jack’s family’s bond with each other:

It (family conversations) just got to be too much sometimes because…I wanted her (Natalie) to be really comfortable and have all her questions answered, but I didn’t know when this was going to end. And it just seemed like she was so strong and adamant about this….I wanted to make sure that the whole family stayed together here. There were some moments where I would change the subject and just try to talk about something else. I even said to her, “Mom, we need to talk about something else. I want to know how work is going.” We would be talking and stuff and my mom would bring up something or she would start talking about something that was gay related and I would just wonder how my dad felt about it you know. “Was he getting mad at her for wanting to talk about this so much?” I just didn’t really know where he was standing. Now I think it’s fine….I don’t think he has a problem with her talking so much about gay related topics and current events and things. I think he kind of like gotten used to it and has a greater understanding now. I realize this because he will actually like join in on the conversation - quiet and shy and trying to digest everything. But every once in awhile he would like bring up something to me and surprise me. He found out about this group of gay and lesbian shooters…called the Pink Pistols….that was cool for him to like, “You know that there is this shooting league for gay people.”

Jack continued to describe his relationship with his father with hope:
So…after coming out to him (Richard), we have had even better conversations. I’ve been able to share a lot of myself and really share my feelings for him and he has opened up so much. It’s incredible, he’s come around. I see my dad being more open and more willing to communicate about things that he would never talk about and really like telling his feelings to me. Like last night he was telling me that when my parents were in Portsmouth last weekend, they went to see this play (gay-related). He was really excited about it and wanted to share it with me….I think it has made us discuss things that maybe we ordinarily wouldn’t discuss and challenge.

He proceeded to narrate a storyline from a television show regarding a woman who was deciding if she was going to abort her child after genetic testing discovered that her child was gay. The woman in the story accidentally had a brother who was gay. Jack’s curiosity led him to use the story hypothetically with his family:

It is a great way that gets the whole family thinking about what this mean. Yes, we (Jack’s family) talked about what that would be like. And actually I think I remember asking her (Natalie) about what she would do if she knew that I was gay when she was carrying me and like what that would mean to her.

Such openness gave permission to Jack’s family to reveal and be vulnerable in their sharing. Natalie explained:

Just being able to talk about our fears and what this meant as a family and individually was a good thing.

Jack’s family’s openness further allowed them to retrace events that led up to Jack’s coming out to help them put the pieces of Jack’s process together. Retracing Jack’s coming out process helped his family understand him better as a person and gave them the opportunity to clarify questions that they had. Natalie shared her feelings about not knowing Jack’s gay identity:

This (Jack keeping his gay identity a secret) is some kind of a play. There are three (Jack, Hal and Catherine) people here involved in this keeping this big secret and going about going to school and doing all this, and I’m not in the loop. None of us (referring to herself Richard, and Rebecca) was in the loop. It did seem like it wasn’t real. And part of me felt like I have always been involved in his (Jack’s) life and here I am for the whole school year, I wasn’t in the loop of this thing for probably six to seven years when he started
becoming aware of who he was. Then another part of me was kind of glad because I wouldn’t have known what to do with this.

Rebecca recalled what she thought after knowing of Jack’s adventures prior to his coming out:

I remember Jack telling me about little adventures that he would go on in Boston and it seemed like he was doing his own different things when he just starting spending time and having social time with people that he knew outside of high school. And I almost thought like he was like undercover doing his own thing, but different from what I knew about. And that his teachers were attending these things was an even greater phenomenon. It was kind of like he was in hiding or something. Can’t really describe it that way but he was doing things that he could feel comfortable with and what he was enjoying.

Being able to retrace Jack’s steps to understand each person’s process better allowed family members to ponder and appreciate each other more. Natalie, for instance, discovered how it must have been for Rebecca when she had to keep Jack’s gay identity a secret until Jack came out to Richard and her:

But I think my process was more on myself and my relationship with Jack, but I was concerned about Rebecca. But this whole interview made me more aware that this was a big burden that Rebecca had on herself -- of this information...not trying to encroach on Jack’s wanting to wait for to proper time to tell myself and Richard.

Jack’s family demonstrated open communication during Jack’s family meeting when they took the opportunity to voice support for each other. Rebecca, for instance, supported Jack’s choice to come out to both his parents at the same time. Addressing Natalie, she said:

If you are told individually, you’re probably thinking, “Does he (Richard) have more information? How is he feeling right now about this?” But if you know and find out at the same time, then you can kind of share the experience together.

Jack’s family meeting like the many family conversations that they would have in dyad and triads, and often in Jack’s family kitchen, was used well by Jack’s family to clarify and perhaps gain some insight. Jack’s family meeting was the point of convergence for Jack’s family as it was the first time they came together as one to discuss and share their thoughts and feelings on their coming out process. In discussing, Jack found that he could have been more prepared as he shared:
I wish I had given you guys some books or something to look at you know. That was the mistake. I would tell my friends that are having difficulties or if they are ready to take the next step, to tell their families, to give them some information so they can read.

Rebecca responded:

That’s something that I didn’t have -- any literature for months. I had to put it in the back of my mind.

Jack’s family was silent for a moment as they pondered on how that might have made a difference for Rebecca. The closeness and care they have for each other was evident at Jack’s family meeting as they listened intently to each other and asked questions to better understand their journey and their struggle.

Family conversations have apparently come full circle with focus turning on to ordinary topics around Rebecca’s and Jack’s social life and not necessarily around sexual orientations.

Natalie shared her observation:

I think that it has brought us closer together and it continues to. I mean for the first six months to a year, this was the main focus of everything, and now it seems in a way to take a back seat a little bit. Now we’re not always talking about gay. I’m involved in a lot of activism work, so I am thinking about it a lot but I don’t think that as a family it is the main discussion all the time. It’s just gotten to be so much like, “Well, did you meet anybody exciting, Jack? It’s just like any interesting boys, Rebecca that you’ve met?” So it’s not different like it was in the beginning. But I feel like we are blessed. We have something very precious and unique that a lot of families do not have.

In the course of increased communication among family members, each member found more opportunities to speak up and have a voice. Jack spoke of the voice that he has found in his family:

I think that even though I am the youngest and people always liked to hear what I had to say, I think that my family respects me a little bit more now. It makes me feel really good that it is happening because for a long time all of this was just in my head and I couldn’t verbalize anything with anyone and I am really excited that people see things the same way I do. Like we -- you and I can have a conversation like this, and my mom and dad, and my sister and Hal and I can all sit down together. It doesn’t even have to be a gay topic we talk about, but we can talk about something else, some relevant current event.
And people are really interested in what I have to say. And I don’t know if it is because of me coming out to them, but, but it is also something that happens when you grow up too….It is an incredible feeling to have that in my family.

He continued:

I think for a long time people just heard me, but heard me in the background. My mom and dad didn’t ever not want to listen to me or didn’t dismiss what I had to say, but was like you know, “Oh, this is Jack talking, he is a young kid.”

Natalie, who has found that conversing was a necessary outlet for her to process her inner turmoil and make sense of her experience, shared:

Having a very adult conversation about the war in Afghanistan or about my beliefs about the military, or where people aren’t yelling at each other like really a civil conversation, are the times I love most in my family because everyone has something to add. Like last night at the dinner table was so great. We were talking about this movie (non-gay related) we all saw. Everybody has to keep talking and discussing when a gay family comes out. That what’s happening today may be different tomorrow and hopefully you’re moving in the right direction -- understanding and acceptance. That it’s not all going to happen overnight.

Building Social Networks

Involvement in gay support groups jumpstarted Jack’s family’s process of building social networks for themselves. Once accepted as a member of the gay community, and feeling confident, family members began to seek acceptance beyond the gay community. Jack’s family began to reintegrate themselves into their social circles at home, at work and at school. The process of building social networks began with Jack’s family deciding on whom to share their “news” with. They decided to be selective in their disclosure resulting in a process of identifying non-discriminatory individuals whom they felt safe with their disclosure or coming out.

This theme encompasses Jack’s family’s search for acceptance in their social circles and their process of gaining community acceptance and expanding the existence of Jack’s family beyond the gay community. Jack’s family’s need to develop supportive social networks reflects their search for belonging and wholeness. The search for belonging and wholeness led family members to embrace their individual coming out processes.


Seeking Community Acceptance

There was a mutual desire for family members to feel accepted as a family with a gay member. Jack shared:

I was surrounded by a lot of great people at work....A lot of other gay and lesbian people, straight allies, who were incredible, who were just as loving as my gay friends and could care less that I was gay. So this was the first time that I had a very close group of young people who loved me and loved that I was gay.

Members, however, were often disheartened with challenges they faced. Hal expressed his need to share their lives and feel integrated with the community:

The good thing is when we have something good, we want to share it. Just by the fact that you’re (the researcher) asking us questions, we’re sharing with you. And of course the toughest thing is how do we share those things with the people next door, the people down the street, and all the good things that happen and that they talk about in their families?

One of the main challenges for Jack’s family was the selectivity in their disclosures. Natalie explained:

It is almost like...a double life sort of thing. It’s picking and choosing...there is this explaining this whole piece (of Jack being gay) and some of these the outside world...they just don’t understand the closeness that the five of us have now. I think you have to be there experiencing that or just us laughing today (referring to breakfast Jack’s family had prior to Jack’s family meeting) and how we’re put together and made.

The cohesiveness of Jack’s family as a unit was evident at Jack’s family meeting where Jack’s family gathered in a relaxed and casual setting. The desire to be known and accepted as who they are, i.e., a normal functioning family is not always reciprocated with acceptance. Natalie explained with pain and frustration in her voice:

The thing is you feel that people are missing out on a big piece of our life....But for me as a mother, a straight person with a gay son...it can just get overwhelming....You want everybody to get it, you want everybody to understand, you want everybody to agree with you and you want everybody to like your kid. And that’s not the way it’s going to be....And from a mother’s point of view, it is hard to not to get upset and say, “You have
to understand that this is my son, period. Because he is a good kid…in God’s eye it’s fine.”

When acceptance was not volunteered from heterosexual individuals, family members turned to the gay community. The enthusiasm from seeking acceptance in the gay community was sometimes overwhelming as Jack elaborated:

And funniest thing is that she (Natalie) has known a lot of gays and lesbians (at work)….At first every lesbian she met (at work) she wanted me to meet. “You have to meet X, or you have to meet Y, or you’ll love them.” I think she had to realize that there are a lot of gays around here. Just because your son is gay, doesn’t mean that even though you feel real excited, you have to like be friends with all the gay people you got to know.

Besides seeking acceptance in their communities at home, at work and at school, acceptance by their religious institution was similarly sought. Jack’s family’s search found them questioning their religious affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church -- the church that Jack’s family belonged to as parishioners. Although Jack’s family’s attendance at church services had decreased over the years prior to Jack’s coming out, they continued to affiliate themselves with it. Not surprisingly, Jack’s family’s attendance at church services further declined as Jack’s family continued to question the lack of gay affirmation in the church. Natalie shared her struggle,

I put my faith on the back burner in the beginning, because I just, I just couldn’t deal with that part of it. I said, “I need to understand more about gay, about relationships, my feelings.” And now I still struggle…just the lack of acceptance. I think sometimes it might be from church to church. Individually there is a lot of open and affirming and accepting Catholic churches. But it’s still there. It still bothers me….some of it is the way you interpret the bible that, “This is wrong.” And I just, I just know, they say, “God doesn’t make junk,” you know. So it is still a struggle.

Likewise, Rebecca expressed her struggle with the Roman Catholic Church:

I think it (Jack’s coming out) has made a huge impact on how I feel. I just think that it’s very wrong to demote that person as…it is sinful that you are having sexual interest and sexual practices with someone of the same gender, and that’s wrong. God looks wrongly upon that. I just feel that (classifying gay as sinful) is wrong. I wouldn’t say like…I have changed my ideals towards the Catholic Church, but mostly I don’t know.
She added that she continues to seek a more gay affirming church:

I would be more interested in attending a church that is more accepting.

Catherine, too, has decided to disassociate with religious groups that do not embrace gay culture:

Like seeing everyone can have their own opinion and I completely agree with that. I have people very close with me that don’t necessarily agree with homosexuality you know but I don’t think now especially that I can ever be part of a religion that would shut gays and lesbians out.

The search for acceptance in a more gay affirming church is shared by other family members. Jack provided some insight into his mother’s struggle with the Roman Catholic Church:

I think they (my family) just had a lot of question about where does the church stand on their opinions about gay people, and what kind of rights they give them? It seems to me like my mom became more familiar with the churches around New Hampshire and what kind of churches were open and affirming, and which churches would do a commitment ceremony for a gay couple. So she became, well through PFLAG which is held at a church…she has met some pretty cool priests and has sat through a couple of workshops about homosexuality and religion. But I think they are just looking for information to find out, “Is this only our religion that is really against gay people or are there other religions.” This is such new territory for them that they just wanted to learn.

Jack offered his struggle with the Roman Catholic Church from having grown up as a member and not feeling accepted as an adult:

I was really confused of like why the church is so (opposing), Catholic faith seems like -- they accept everyone. And everyone is created equal, they love men and women. Why are they so discriminatory against this one certain group of people (referring to gay). I thought that you’re suppose to…respect everyone and stuff. So when I was learning all that and…in terms with my sexuality, the church was like…this doesn’t hold up here you know. “Why are they?” I just didn’t understand, so I kind of lost a lot of my respect for the church because it seemed like such a simple thing. For all this time they have been so open me, having me as such a young kid in their church and then if I had told them that I was gay, a lot of people might have been upset. I don’t think I would be kicked out of the
church as a teenager, but I would have been looked at as a different person and it doesn’t seem right. I am still the same person.

Jack’s search for spiritual acceptance led him to redefine the meaning of spirituality. He justified his response:

I just started reading about gay people and their kind of faith and it seemed to me that once a person comes out, they kind of, depending on how religious they are, they kind of break away from their church and either go somewhere and change their religion to something that is a little bit less homophobic and they find a new way of living a spiritual life whether if it’s through holistic health or yoga if you need that. For me I don’t. It’s not really that important for me to follow any kind of faith. If people ask me what religion I am now and if I feel comfortable around them, I tell them, “After I came out, I kind of lost my connection with the Catholic Church in a way because they’re just not accepting for my kind of people and I don’t want to go to a place that doesn’t like me or doesn’t want me as one of their members.” But for me nowadays just being and like carrying on everyday and like trying to be a good person and helping out around the community. For me community volunteer work (italics added) was a really spiritual year.

The search for acceptance caused a natural elimination of individuals or groups that discriminated against gays. In additional to that, some family members found it difficult to expect society to accept and embrace gay culture. Family members found that they needed to negotiate and compromise with anti-gay jokes/comments. Rebecca explained:

I think people have to make jokes because they feel very uncomfortable….And they go on and on making jokes…just because they want to feel like better than the other one, like more macho. It’s just like their way of interacting. It doesn’t feel like hurtful to me. But it doesn’t feel like they’re putting, they’re not talking about like a particular person they know who is gay. It’s just their mindset and like to a heterosexual man, to some of them, it is unacceptable.

Richard also found that he has become more tolerant of gay related jokes:

Well that (anti-gay jokes) still happens. I am probably more understanding towards the gay jokes than I was before.

Richard, however, is optimistic that pro-gay sentiments are currently on the rise:
It’s just (what) I think diversity hold towards race and religion, is coming around, where things are much more accepted -- probably on a higher increase.

While personal encounters with persons and institutions continue to pose a challenge to family members’ need for acceptance and integration, they find solace in media’s efforts to integrate gay culture. Jack’s family cite their observation of an increase in positive connotations of gay culture in the media with the increase in gay-related shows and inclusion of gay jargon in advertisements. Jack shared his observations:

The LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) community is starting to emerge as a stronger group of people who are less of a stereotype and more and more people became comfortable coming out. The more that we become…visible, it makes it so much easier for everyone else to recognize us and to put a face to a name. And a lot of the old stereotypes that my grandparents have are just being forgotten. So for me the media was, …I think it is starting -- this is the beginning of a whole world of gay culture. It’s so funny because I have noticed like ads on television about, “Come out of the closet about your car tires. You need to get rid of your old Firestone tires and buy these new tires.” These companies are using this type of lingo to sell their product like, “Come out, do this,” and they would never do this 10 yrs ago, or 15 yrs ago you know. People are really starting to embrace gay people. I think for certain movies we became shown in a different light and there is more good shown towards gay and lesbian couples. And it wasn’t so much of a big deal to show that a gay person as…healthy.

*The Coming Out of Jack’s Family*

Family members initially found themselves associating only with the gay community for the security it offered. After Jack’s family felt more comfortable with their new identity, they began to come out to their communities at home, at work and at school. The decision to come out was, however, performed with courtesy and respect for other family members. Other then being selective in whom they came out to, Jack’s family as a whole also ensured that permission was sought particularly from Jack prior to coming out to acquaintances of Jack’s family

Natalie explained:

We had a phone conversation. Just kind of agreed that we needed to be careful who we talked to and we needed to make sure that Jack was in agreement with who you would
talk to if you choose to talk to anybody. And I would always ask them (other family members) if it would be a problem for me to talk to so and so.

Jack was equally selective in his coming out. He relied on his “gaydar,” a term that he uses to describe gay individual’s ability to tell another gay person in a crowd, to identify whom he would come out to. Although there were openly gay and lesbian students in his high school, his inability to identify with their degree of openness and flamboyance caused Jack to avoid them. Jack’s gaydar led him to come out to Hal, a teacher who Jack thought might be gay. Jack said:

It was okay for me to tell Hal because he is gay. He couldn’t care less, ‘Okay, another gay person.’

The second person Jack came out to was more anxiety provoking because she, Catherine, is straight. Jack explained:

I had to evaluate my relationship with Catherine. This is different because now I was telling a straight person….for a straight person, I know Catherine very well, but I don’t know how she was going to react to this. I was really nervous.

The anxiety that Jack experienced as he came out to others was similarly experienced by his family members in their coming out process. Natalie shared her anxiety:

You just get to the point, and it is scary to tell somebody for the first time.

Coming out was an emotional experience for most family members. Richard described his coming out to his boss as, “a little emotional,” indicating sadness.

Although coming out was often done in person, some family members relied on word of mouth to get the word out. When asked if his colleagues knew that his son is gay, Richard said:

I have talked to my boss about it. If the rest of the officers don’t know, I would be shocked. In a small town, there are no secrets. Natalie is very active in…gay and lesbian activities. People see that stuff. I would be very, very surprised if they don’t know. I have in general kept it quiet. In general I haven’t said anything to the guys. I think if they asked me, I wouldn’t lie….I would admit that my son is who he is.

Jack also found using close friends as “messengers” as an effective way to inform others that he is gay. He explained how he used two close friends as messengers:

I came out to two of my closest girlfriends….I wasn’t worried that they would go and tell everyone. In a way I wanted them to do that. I think I was saying after I told them that,
“It’s okay if you guys want to talk about this to your families and our other friends and stuff,” because there is no possible way that I can visit everyone….Yes, the word got out. Jack found this to be an effective method to reach the people in his home community – a community with whom he does not feel too comfortable mingling. He described his feelings when he visits Hal who is openly gay:

A little bit different going back….I was really weird about doing things with Hal in our hometown and people seeing the two of us together there. For me like…doing things…like outside of my community of people was safer for me because I hate running into people and be like, “Hi, how are you doing?” Like friends in high school and like my parents’ friends….Most of the people are really friendly and like, “Oh yes.” But I’m wondering like, “What are they thinking about when they do leave?”

Timing was another feature that determined a family member’s coming out. The pressure to disclose Jack’s family’s connection with the gay community slowly eased as family members learned that there was no urgency to come out. Family members found that they had to give permission to themselves to ease the pressure to come out or to discuss gay-related issues.

Natalie explained:

And unless it really, really came up I probably wouldn’t (disclose Jack’s gay identity). But I’m finding that it is okay to pick and choose who you have a conversation with. Everybody doesn’t have to know. I mean if it just comes out in a conversation or whatever or I get asked, “How are the kids?”…So at some point I would probably say, “Well Jack hasn’t met a partner yet, but he is still looking for the right, the right guy and Rebecca is doing fine.” And I would love to be able to just do that. Now I’m getting more comfortable instead of saying, “You know that Jack is gay don’t you?”

I have learned…that it is okay not to talk about this. You can be in a conversation with somebody and something can come up about gay rights or gay whatever and just continue on with the conversation and not even say anything about, and maybe not say that you have a gay friend but you know someone who is. Or not even say anything at all because it might ruin the whole evening and it’s okay to give yourself permission not to discuss this.

A similar contention in regards to coming out and timing is shared by Rebecca although her encounters have, for the most part, been around jokes about gay. Rebecca shared her dilemma:
I wanted to say, “You know, my brother is gay.” I wanted to say it so badly, but I took my own time and my own way of letting people know. I didn’t tell all of my close friends either. I didn’t talk to my college roommate about it. Eh, mostly because I knew that her and our other close friends do a lot of joking about gay people. Despite such occasional encounters, Rebecca claimed to have received support from her friends. Jack shared his observations:

The greatest thing for Rebecca was when she started telling her friends. Her friends didn’t leave her. They didn’t not become her friends anymore. They didn’t disappear off the planet. And her roommate now -- when she told her roommate, I was just so happy. I couldn’t be happier for her because Rebecca had come out to someone, and it’s really tough to do that, especially when you don’t understand it well enough yourself. So that showed me that she was getting a better grappling of this.

While Jack’s family members often struggle with coming out, Jack says that it is unusual for him to encounter unpleasantness when he has chosen to come out. He attributes his positive experiences to the newness of the environments to which he has chosen to come out. Jack elaborated on his transition to college after having spent a year doing community service:

Starting here (college) was really cool because I had to start all over and it was like for me at the beginning of *community volunteer work* (italics added); meeting people who didn’t know me at all. And once they found out that I was gay, it wasn’t a big deal because we didn’t have a history together. So if I lost them as a friend it wasn’t so bad because I didn’t know them very well. So the same thing in college. This is such a different community anyways, from New Hampshire and high school. People are more mature. There are so many more other gays and lesbians that it’s kind of safer for us around here.

The only time Jack found himself in a compromising situation was with his Arab roommate who had difficulty accepting gay sexual orientation:

We had a lot of similar experiences, him being a minority as an Arab and me being gay. We talked about what it was like to live in the world today and for a long time he just really thought that I was confused. He had told me, “You know Jack, I don’t understand. You are going to be mad at me but I think you are confused.” About “who I am.” Because he believed that even though I am not attracted to a woman, I could live with a
woman and sleep with a woman and have a family and love a woman like a friend and not be in love with a woman.

Jack said that he had tried his very best to explain himself but to no avail:

I think he (roommate) doesn’t know enough gay people and doesn’t know enough good quality people like myself to really understand that this is something that he just needs to give up…I am going to follow his belief system and it is not that I have bad values or I am a bad person because I am attracted to men.

Jack’s family is continuously challenged to come out and be honest with their identity and affiliation with gay individuals in various social settings. They reached a point of comfort where they are not only involved with the gay community, but the gay community is involved in their lives. Richard explained:

It’s been a really strange situation, because I don’t know if we will ever have invited gay people over (to Jack’s family’s home) before Jack came out.

Family members believed that when Jack is partnered, making his gay identity more visible, Jack’s family will transit to an “open” family more easily. Natalie shared her hopes for her family’s integration and acceptance in their community:

When there is a real, when there is a boyfriend, the more social events that we go to, we’re going to be more out and that is going to be the challenge…what other people think.

When both the hope and hesitance in her voice was reflected back to her, Natalie expressed her hesitance with a chuckle:

Yes! It’s just, you want to please everyone all the time, and that’s not going to happen. It takes a lot of energy sometimes, people don’t understand. Or they just…I don’t think people know what to do with something different. They are just so used to things being the same.

Jack similarly feels that his degree of integration into the community would be different if and when he has a partner on his arm:

But I haven’t had a significant boyfriend either to talk about. So that really helps like, “I’m dating so and so.” And I think that really makes it real for a person. Like “Jack can be gay.” But when they see you with another guy, then, “Okay, so this is true.”

At the time of this interview, Jack had just begun dating his first love interest.
Social Awakening

Jack’s family’s identification with the gay community gave them a sense of exclusivity. This exclusivity pronounced their new identity that was for the most part invisible; invisible yet real. The reality was in how they felt as a family with a gay member -- marginalized. They felt like any other marginalized minority group. They felt stripped of their status as a middle class White family with 2.2 children and were now potentially ostracized. Jack’s family’s realization of their minority status was the impetus for some members to take a stand against discrimination and join rallies that supported gay rights. This action in itself caused tension within Jack’s family as family members who were not ready to take a bold and public stand felt pressured and perhaps judged for their lack of enthusiasm and activism.

Once again it was family members’ respect for each other and the bonding of members that helped them cope with their differences and support each others’ causes. Together Jack’s family sought a more conscious existence in society with their personal and sometimes political stand. Jack’s family’s journey from identifying with the marginalized to their increased social activism follows.

Self-identifying as a Minority

The sense of being marginalized and shunned by society was felt by most family members at one point or another. For Rebecca her minority status dawned on her at her first PFLAG meeting. She described her reaction:

We went downstairs of a church (the meeting was held in a back room of the church). My initial feelings were that this was something that was shunned. I had a family member who is part of this culture. So it was this awkward feeling.

Interestingly, while Rebecca remembers the PFLAG meeting as held “downstairs” of the church, according to Natalie, the meetings were in fact held at the back of the church.

For Natalie, associating with a minority struck her much sooner. Natalie shared the anxiety she felt on her drive home from Jack’s after he had come out to Richard and her:

I felt right away when we (Natalie and Richard) were going home, I said, “We’re a minority. We may be an invisible minority.” But if we choose to act upon being out and open and discuss this, we really -- we are a minority. People, eh, might not like us (in a sad and anxious tone).
She continued to share that her increased knowledge from reading gay related literature confirmed her “membership” to a minority group as she began to draw parallels between other minority groups.

Identifying with marginalized groups was a challenge for many family members as they sought to understand what it really meant. Natalie spent a considerable amount of time pondering what being marginalized meant:

But to really have someone in your family tell you that they’re gay, it puts a whole different swing on things….Yes, I mean it is a whole other culture and terminology like coming out and being in the closet. You hear the word diversity and you think. Now I always think diversity is gay, but doesn’t diversity means a lot of different things? Jack’s family had an open conversation where they discussed and sought out the meaning of “diversity” at Jack’s family meeting. Many versions of what constituted diversity were raised and discussed. The main discussion revolved around whether diversity is defined by one’s identity or by one’s actions. Rebecca, who initially felt that diversity could be differentiated by one’s actions, summed up the discussion:

It (identity and behavior) is two different things, but speaking about minority to me is kind of you can feel like left out or just the way people look at you or perceive you.

The conversation with other members of Jack’s family and the input from those present at Jack’s family meeting seemed to have been the impetus for Rebecca to redefine diversity for herself.

Jack’s family apparently had not been exposed to much diversity having lived in a predominantly White town for most of their lives. They found that their personal views of minorities changed as they embraced their gay identity. Jack found himself comparing and relating to the visibly diverse groups in Boston:

I compare myself to a lot of other minority and people …in the Boston community and I realize that I have the same struggle that they do -- those kind of people that I never related to when I was growing up partly because I didn’t see them in our neighborhood very much in New Hampshire.

The more Jack embraced his gay identity, the more he realized the degree of his marginalization and how it can affect his future decisions:

I don’t feel comfortable joining the military right now. If I was drafted, I don’t know what I would do. I need to be comfortable and be myself and hiding who I am attracted to
and serving our country would be a strong struggle for me. All this stuff is weird to think about you know, but it is part of being who I am and I have to accept that.

Jack’s family as a whole had a taste of being a visible minority in a foreign land. With the help of Hal, Jack’s family’s interest in travel took them abroad to a land where natives spoke a language understood by three of the five members who went on the trip. The trip provided Jack’s family an opportunity to experience being visibly “different.” Natalie explained:

We were all of a sudden a minority in another country. So that was kind of interesting to experience -- to be on the flip side of the fence.

The trip had also apparently sensitized Jack’s family to issues of diversity. In one of the many speeches that Natalie gives annually in her work that supports gay rights, she explained how she has changed:

When I wrote one of my speeches that I gave earlier on, I said that you are looking at the world in different eyes and I think that you are more sensitive to gay people, but you also become more sensitive to all minorities. It is a good thing. It makes you more understanding.

There remains an ambiguity of Jack’s family’s transition into marginalization despite efforts on their part to embrace their new minority status. Jack expressed the ambiguity and is supported by other members of his family who nod in agreement:

Jack: Which is weird, because thinking of our family as being a minority because for the longest time we have been the majority. I mean we are a White, mid middle class New Hampshire family.

Natalie: The typically 2.2.

Jack: Yes, two parents, a boy and a girl, three cats (Jack’s family members present laugh). Now all of the sudden we are thrown in this minority category with a gay son. It’s kind of weird.

When asked what was weird about being a minority, Jack replied:

It’s that we haven’t changed anything. I think we might just look at each other a little different now.

*Politicizing a Personal Stand*

The confirmation and acceptance of one’s new identity led Jack’s family to become more attuned to social issues that affects gays and other minority groups. Natalie shared:
I think I have gotten more sensitive. I mean anytime I hear anything on the news that is related to gay, my ears perk up. And I never was politically active before and that is something that is different. I am much more tuned into what’s going on in the Far East, in the political scene and more sensitive in it.

Natalie is also more attuned to how media can play a more prominent role in normalizing gay relationships:

Now I am starting to notice, it’s like as far as the advertising in magazines and some other stuff. It would be nice if we would start seeing if instead of the heterosexual male and female together, if we could see in the background two males, or two females. I am getting more tuned in to that kind of thing.

Family members also awakened to how taking a more public stand on issues can serve a justified purpose. Rebecca struggled with public display of activism for awhile before she finally grasped its importance:

I think the most awkward thing for me is like that sense that, that group of people want to really bring themselves out in public, march down the street and show their rainbow colors and just be like all other people like them. That’s been very odd. That’s been awkward, an odd kind of interpretation….from my perspective. You know, you’re just who you are. Why is it that you want the whole world to know who you are? But at the same time, given that I’ve gotten to know my brother and given that I can try to put myself in his place or someone else’s place, but society doesn’t accept me. Society thinks that we are a horrible lifestyle. I can see why they want to present themselves. Some people (referring to gay individuals) want to present themselves publicly. “Here we are, we feel comfortable about ourselves, and this is what we want to do. We just want to let you all know we’re just contented people. We also have a lot of mixed feelings, we’re angry, we’re disappointed,” At the same time people who are marching in parades, are also marching to say, “Now, give us rights in the church, give us rights in health issues, give us rights in education and allow us to spread the news to you…. Initially though, I thought that it was profound, unnecessary and awkward.

As family members became more aware and attuned to the dilemmas of gays, they became drawn to take a stand on anti-gay issues and contribute to the betterment of society. Jack would not sit quietly while the world went by before him. He argued:
How I can live and how I could possibly take this information to understand how I can be a help to gay persons in the world? And see all the hatred towards my kind of people…and it is only going to make the world for gay and lesbian people better to tell their stories. Who is going to find out about gay people and who is going to learn about gay people if no one speaks up?

Natalie’s involvement in activism is similarly motivated by her desire to enhance the lives of other members of the gay community. The chance to participate came at an opportune time in her life when she was questioning her existence and meaning in life. She was looking for a direction to stir her life and she instinctively followed her call:

I think in the beginning just needing the knowledge, needing to learn more was to grow in my acceptance and then I needed to figure out a way to be involved because I felt so passionate about this. This is my son and then reading about all the hate and the harassment and death that happen to gay people and it made me reach out from within. It made me stronger, challenged me to do things that I would never thought I’ll be doing. Like my public speaking that I am doing as a parent of a gay son. It is making me more aware of political issues and I think that is making me a stronger person. And at this point in life, if we don’t have a focus of where you’re going, it’s done. That I think…that it was a whole timing thing. Where I was in my career, in my life with the kids leaving home and going on with their own life.

Family members’ conviction to make a change towards a better world influenced each other. Natalie spoke of how she influenced Rebecca’s stand on issues of social injustice:

I think Rebecca was much more hesitant to talk to anybody about this to begin with. Jack and I were the ones who were outgoing about talking. There were safety issues and confidentiality. Rebecca has it too. In the past she’s (Rebecca) said, “Why tell anybody about this.” And until she started reading stuff I had brought home talking about rights to see their partners in the hospital, all these different issues, (Rebecca exclaimed) “Gosh, I never thought of that.” (Natalie replies) “And this is why it is important to talk about. You don’t usually have to go around and talk about your sibling’s sexuality, but this is why.”

Both Richard and Jack, too, observed the influence that Natalie has on Jack’s family’s movement toward increased social awareness. Jack explained:
Her (Natalie’s) power role has changed a lot and she…I think that she is more willing to say something to my dad or my sister. I think that she has gained this edge in our family. She is a little less quiet and a little less reserved.

Hal, who was instrumental in awakening Jack’s family’s senses to social issues, offered his take on Natalie’s enthusiasm and involvement:

And I think what Natalie took on gave her meaning, it gave her a very special meaning to come and find out what this was all about. It was extremely important for her to get answers for herself, but I think she saw that this was bigger than that. This was a part of life.

After Jack’s family was sufficiently convinced of how vital it was to take a stand against discrimination towards minority groups, family members began speaking in the presence of their friends and acquaintances. Members who were more activated found themselves gravitating towards more public forms of activism and taking a more prominent role in the gay community.

Catherine’s conscious stand to avoid involvement in anti-gay groups speaks of her closeted form of activism:

But now that I have a best friend who is gay, I am a lot more conscious if it. I want to make sure that I don’t really include myself in groups that would hate gays.

Rebecca, too, finds herself taking a more private or closeted form of activism. Referring to jokes about gay men, she said:

When I first met my boyfriend and his friend, (they) would hang out and I was just, “Why are they saying (referring to anti-gay comments)…this is so annoying. Do they have a stereotype towards that (gay)?” So I guess in that regards, my voice has changed a little bit, and I see people who are ignorant of that lifestyle. But I see people who are talking down about bisexuals and that’s when I get angry.

She continued to explain her current stand:

Usually I might say something, but not every moment. I want to say, “That it is wrong, or…I have a brother who is very close to me and he is really great person. And you’ll find that that (anti-gay beliefs) is not true.” I don’t find myself cramming information down people’s throat in the first instance of that kind of behavior or that kind of talk because it could be someone just joking around, or someone who is nervous about the
topic and that’s just their way of kind of...they joke because they are nervous because they are uneasy about the topic.

Richard’s response to anti-gay sentiments is consistent with Rebecca’s more closeted form of activism. He explained that he is not ready to display his opinions publicly and compared it to other fathers of gay men:

I’m comfortable at home but not in public. I am not in that crusading phase, maybe someday I will. I have met several husbands of gay moms. I guess they’re almost in the same category as I am.

Richard continued to imply that his response to gay related social issues is not as passionate as Natalie’s. He explained, referring to the anger that he saw behind Natalie’s passion:

I don’t know if it’s being over protective or she’s just made it her crusade that she wants to get the word out to other people...gay people are special and they are not evil and they ought to be treated (equally)

Natalie agreed that her rage was the catalyst that launched her passion in social activism: When I reading those stupid articles in the paper, I really started me funneling my anger into doing something productive like sending an electronic mail (referring to an electronic mail message she had written to a newspaper column writer who described same sex marriages as an “erosion of the institution of marriage,”) or getting involved in PFLAG. That helped me channel it somewhere and you know, grow to the next step. You can get upset about something so quick. You just need to do something about it.

Besides the public rallies and speeches, Natalie made known of her gay-friendliness by displaying symbols in her car. She shared these rather bold steps:

Maybe the most threatening thing that I did is the first sticker that I put on the car. And that was a big step for me putting a bumper sticker on the car....about being kind to people. That probably wasn’t too gay related that anybody would take offense to. There is a human rights sticker that has an equal sign. If people know what that is, they’ll know that it is about gay rights. And then I put a rainbow bear in the car and that was a big step.

She did, however, realize that these subtle indicators were threatening to her family and recalled Rebecca’s concerns that Jack’s family could be a target for hate crimes:

“Mom I’m not going to get involved in this but you’re not going to do anything....I don’t want to be a target,” (exclaims Rebecca).
Despite her family’s concerns and fear for their safety, Natalie could not see herself remaining a closeted activist. She implied that her involvement in social activism was destined:

When you really know what is important in your life and the driving force is the loss of your son.

Natalie saw no other choice for her but to make her voice heard. Jack described his mother’s public fight for a better world:

That was really incredible because she (Natalie) was so passionate about education and making her voice heard. She has even spoken at the State House…and spoken at other schools and at colleges. I never pictured her doing this public speaking kind of…these engagements. It’s just so surprising that in such a short amount of time, her whole life has turned around.

Jack also realized a strong streak of propagating a cause in his father who strongly believes in the rights to bear arms and advocate the safe use of firearms. Jack likened his father’s cause to his cause for equal rights:

He is like really adamant about his like political role, for the rights to bear arms, banning guns, like the Brady Bill, and a gun owner’s right. It is the same thing for me with gay rights. I want to be able to be married and like adopt children and stuff. So we both have similar goals I guess.

Jack, who is involved in advocating for gay rights, continues to seek ways to get involved and contribute to his cause. He has plans to get involved in a gay men’s domestic violent project as he feels that, “it is an issue that is swept under the rug and that it is not seriously talked about,” in the gay community. Jack also displayed remarkable foresight in his plans to create a more harmonized world that embraces diversity. He spoke fondly of a town in Pennsylvania that is highly populated with gay families, and although an enticing idea, he says:

I don’t know if I would want to live in an environment like that because I think they’re not really doing any thing. They’re not really making the world a better place if they are all living together. If I was up here in New Hampshire…I would be…my children would be struggling, but I would be doing more for the cause so to speak.

Natalie chimed in thoughtfully:

You’re not raising kids in diversity.
Jack and his family are progressively getting more involved in the larger society with the aim of educating and sowing the seeds to more gay-friendliness. Theirs is a noble cause that has perturbed Jack’s family’s equilibrium, but its strong grounding in Jack’s family’s values has facilitated their change. Jack elaborated:

We’re doing a little bit for the gay community. And we’re doing it in a slow process and making other families who are similar to us have the same morals and ideals. We’re making them acknowledge that it’s okay. Like you can have a member of your family be gay but you can also hold on to all your fundamentals and values. It’s not going to make you a different kind of family. It’s not going to form you into a different group of people, into a different category.

He continued:

I think that it’s a very different world now for us because before I told anyone, we didn’t have any connection to gay people and the gay community. I picture it as we have gone from a very conservative family to almost a liberal family.

Summary

The coming out process of Jack’s family can be explained as a journey through multiple levels. There was the initial response of each member that took them into an internal journey of the “self.” This intrapsychic level finds members pre-occupied with personal repercussions of being a member of a family with a gay man. There was also the self-reflection of members’ purpose and meaning in life and the direction to take in life with the onset of Jack’s coming out.

Concurrent with the intrapsychic level is the interpersonal level that found family members fostering new relationships with one another. These new relationships allow and elicit in-depth sharing of members’ personal worldviews. The sharing and acknowledging of multiple realities within Jack’s family led to members’ personal and collective development of worldviews, beliefs, and values.

A distinct yet simultaneous change in Jack’s family was their involvement in the larger system outside Jack’s family, such as the gay community. Jack’s family’s membership with the gay community led them to embrace a more open and accepting worldview that recognizes gay individuals as legitimate members of society. The integration into the gay community led Jack’s family to reveal their gay identity with the largely heterocentric (i.e., the assumption that development naturally proceeds in a heterosexual direction) society in which they exist. The
daunting task of Jack’s family coming out led to the realization of who they are as a member of a marginalized social group.

The identification with the marginalized gay community and their personal call to take a stand against discrimination of the gay community found Jack’s family taking a role beyond their communities. The quest for anti-discrimination took Jack’s family to yet another level – a political level where they face the challenge to take a personal stand in society at large. Jack’s family evolved from taking an intrapsychic stance to interpersonal, communal, and social engagements. There was, however, no clear sequence of progression through these levels. At times, one or more of these levels seem to exist simultaneously with no clear indication of any one precipitating another.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

This chapter provides a discussion of the findings from the study and links it to existing literature, theoretical frameworks that guide this study, and the research questions. It also identifies limitations to the study and states the conclusions of the study. Finally, it lists implications for clinical practice with lesbians and gay men and their families, as well as for future research with gay families.

Discussion of Findings

Growth of Jack’s Family System

Jack’s sexual orientation disclosure initiated a systems change in his family-of-origin. Immediately after Jack came out to his family, his family became a temporarily closed system. The closed system was an attempt of Jack’s family to ward off additional stressors. Adopting a closed system is consistent with Johnson’s (1992) study of parents of lesbians and gay men that found family systems closing as a reaction to coming out of a family member. This developmental phase of a family system is necessary of pulling in before moving forward.

The brief period as a closed system saw Jack’s family struggle with the disequilibrium that resulted from Jack’s coming out. Jack’s family, however, gradually progressed from a closed system to an open system as they sought support from persons such as Hal, Catherine, and individuals from support groups. The inclusion of a support system into Jack’s family reduced the chaos within Jack’s family bringing it back to a state of equilibrium or homeostasis. Jack’s family’s natural progression from a closed system to an open system confirms von Bertalanffy’s (Davidson, 1983) view of systems as open organisms - - entities that cautiously interacts with their environment. Jack’s family survived stress by allowing the natural progression to an open system rather than forcing Jack’s family to remain closed.

von Bertalanffy further states that as living systems, families do not passively react to stimuli, but rather autonomously initiate much creative activity to enhance themselves. He further coined the term “equifinality” to describe a system’s ability to reach a final goal from different initial conditions and in different ways. It implies a system’s inner-directed ability to protect or restore its wholeness. This self-regulation or self-healing process was demonstrated in Jack’s family as they came together and relied on their cohesiveness and belief in each other to direct Jack’s family towards accepting a “gay” identity. The steps to “self-educate” about gay
culture and Jack’s family’s involvement in the gay community were deliberate attempts to enhance Jack’s family’s ability to adapt to the “news.” Jack’s family’s use of resources is consistent with Waldner and Magruder’s (1999) and D’Augelli et al.’s (1998) studies that cite supportive resources as effective coping strategies after a member comes out as gay. von Bertalanffy’s idea that families do not resist change to maintain their status quo (Davidson, 1983), but in fact seek change and possess the ability to do so is also shared by Milton Erickson (Bogdan, 1983). The inner desire for change and the ability to effect change was again reflective of Jack’s family as they continue to evolve from their rather conservative worldview to embrace a somewhat more liberal and diversified view of the world. The new family identity galvanized Jack’s family to adopt a social agenda that did not exist prior to Jack’s coming out.

Jack’s family’s growth was a result of the interaction between Jack’s family and other systems in their community, namely, their support systems. Jack’s family integrated themselves into society with their new identity and built social networks for the natural support systems. Embracing their gay identity challenged family members who tended to restrain Jack’s family’s growth. Individuals’ beliefs and values were challenged by members of this family, such as Natalie who ventured out of Jack’s family system and invited liberalism. Her open embrace of gay community members challenged Rebecca’s and Richard’s reservations about their involvement in the gay community.

The links that Jack’s family developed with individuals or groups of individuals in their community also changed Jack’s family’s community structure. The change in Jack’s family’s external context produced changes in individual family members that allowed them to embrace their gay identity. Jack’s family’s process of change echoes structural philosophy where the key to changing an individual is to change the context in which the individual exists (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). They go on to explain that a change in Jack’s family structure elicits a more competent “partial self” of family members which, in turn, reinforces Jack’s family change and facilitates Jack’s family’s adaptation process.

Structural Change

Jack’s family did not only react, but were actors who initiated activity to adapt to the overall change in Jack’s family system. Family bonding and the open communication among family members appeared to have played a key role in navigating Jack’s family through their
coming out process individually and collectively. Family bonding that improves the cohesion among members is also noted by Kaffko (1994), Olson, Sprenkle, and Russell (1979) and Saranson, Saranson, and Pierce (1990) as the foundation of supportive interaction within Jack’s family. Devine (1984) further proposes that the distance and closeness of emotional bonding, rules (spoken and unspoken), role expectations, and family themes are key influences to the change in Jack’s family system.

Additionally, the reported deterioration in the parental relationship between Natalie and Richard, immediately after sexual orientation disclosure, and an improvement in the relationship over time, is consistent with the findings of Cramer and Roach (1988), Leaveck (1994), and Leaveck, Roanan, and Hammontree (1992). There was a role realignment in the couple relationship as they adopted a more equitable distribution of power, a greater sense of attachment, and independence (also observed by Kaffko, 1994), facilitating more sharing and ability to “voice” their thoughts. A similar recognition of voice was evident in the other family members as well, particularly Jack, who, as the youngest member of Jack’s family, stepped into adulthood. The timing of Jack’s coming out as he matures into young adulthood while his parents experience middle age further accounts for the stress on Jack’s family. The two main family life transitions, i.e., launching of an adult child and midlife transition, can be both a liberating fulfillment and an impetus to a midlife crisis (Nichols, 1986). Both are normal family development trajectories that call for as second-order change in Jack’s family system. Rebecca too was transitioning from college life to employment adding stress to the overall family structure.

A second-order change is required to realign a family when it transitions from one stage of Jack’s family life cycle to the next (Nichols & Schwartz, 1991). A life cycle transition is described by Carter and McGoldrick (1988) as a process of expansion, contraction, and realignment of the relationship system to support the entry, exit, and development of family members in a functional way. A second-order change, a term from cybernetics, refers to a change in family rules as opposed to a first-order change that refers to a change in behaviors that are governed by the same rules (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974). The change in Jack’s family’s rules is reflected in the realignment of roles and the redistribution of power. Family members observed both Natalie and Jack naturally assuming a more prominent role in Jack’s family. Their more active role also afforded them more power in terms of having a “voice.”
Richard’s power reflected in his more silent demeanor, compliments that of Natalie’s who exhibited her power verbally.

Natalie’s role change in her family is the effects of her efforts to humanize gays, change cultural attitudes, and mobilize society to move beyond tolerance to embrace diversity. Her agenda mirrors that of Judy Sheppard (the mother of Matthew Sheppard who was brutally murdered in a gay-related crime), cited in Savin-Williams (2001). For Natalie, Jack’s coming out was an opportunity for personal growth that coincided with her midlife transition, a time that she was questioning her meaning in life. Jack’s launch into adulthood saw him asserting confidence as he searched and secured a place in his family as a young adult. Other more purposeful rule change included the decision to and the timing of Jack’s family’s “outing.”

*Individual’s Personal Process*

The adaptation process led family members into an intrapsychic journey of the “self” as they tried to strike a balance between the true identity of Jack’s family and the social norms of what constitutes a family. The emotional response of members’ adaptation process differs from one member to another and is supported by the bereavement literature (Kubler-Ross, 1984; Parkes & Weiss, 1983; Raphael, 1983) and the literature on coming out within Jack’s family (Ben-Ari, 1995; Borhe, 1983; Clark, 1977; D’Augelli et al., 1998; Devine, 1984; Fairchild & Hayward, 1979; Rafkin, 1987; Sauerman, 1984; Silverstein, 1977; Strommen, 1989). The emotional experiences that appear to reduce over time with Jack’s family were shock, confusion, sadness, loss, denial, fear, guilt, and anger (not in any particular order although shock predominates) as Jack’s family progressively felt more accepted and integrated into their communities.

Family members’ intrapsychic process appears to encompass more than just bereavement. This observation is supported by Beeler and DiProva (1999) and Savin-Williams (2001). There seems to be a relational aspect to Jack’s family’s experience such as negotiating distance among family members, the sense of being rejected, the search for someone or something to blame, and concern for Jack. This more relational component is supported by Sauerman (1984). Despite the inconclusive specificity of the transitions of Jack’s family in prior studies, however, the progression from shock, to a struggle about the gay person and the self, to a reorganization of attitudes and responses, followed by acceptance is shared by Devine (1984), Johnson (1992), Robinson et al. (1989), Sauerman (1984), and Wirth (1978).
The responses of family members also appear to be gendered, where women and men responded differently. Catherine, Rebecca and Natalie’s adaptation process tended to be more volatile and relationally oriented. Their responses focused on closeness and distance, whereas Richard’s responses seemed to remain rather steady and controlled throughout Jack’s family’s coming out process. Richard although less verbal in the interviews compared to other family members, was intentional and explicit in his sharing. A gendered pattern of responses was also noticed by Greenfield’s (1992) study of lesbians and their parents. Additionally, Richard seemed less aware of experiencing much of a process although Jack clearly noticed a change in the quality of communication between Richard and him, and Richard’s degree of homophobia. The lack of association of experience with the coming out process is also reflective of Greenfield’s observations.

Reasons that may contribute to Richard’s more homonegative responses are his more traditional gender-role stereotyping reflected in his offer to equip Jack with more masculine self-defense skills, his former military involvement, and his stronger endorsement of religion. The correlation between gender-role stereotyping and religious orthodoxy, i.e., strict adherence to religious rites and traditions, among other more conventional views with levels of homophobia was similarly cited in Cramer and Roach (1988), Holtzen and Agresti (1999), Johnson (1992), and Leaveck (1994).

Sharing Multiple Perspectives

The increased opportunity to communicate openly facilitated family members’ telling of their stories. The depth of sharing and the receptiveness of family members to hear each other and respond led members to reconstruct meaning and reframe their epistemology. This reconstruction of one’s epistemology is an on-going feature of Jack’s family’s coming out process. That mental construction is dependent upon one’s existing epistemology is an idea that is shared by von Bertalanffy (1968). von Bertalanffy’s perspectivism refers to the belief that while reality exists, the reality that is known can never be fully objective because it is filtered through a particular perspective. The on-going dialogue and the sharing of different perspectives among “players” in the system is the process that facilitates the creation of models or views of the world. These created models direct what is actually seen and what is considered as fact (Davidson, 1983).
The role of constructivism on Jack’s family is evident in their collaboration and conversations about issues pertaining to each member’s personal struggle and experience with gay identity and culture. An atmosphere of respect and attempts to understand each person’s private reality is consistent with postmodernists’ attempt to give credence to multiple realities. This pluralistic nature of focusing on many views rather than one view is not control-oriented and is lateral rather than hierarchical (Hoffman, 1988).

Lateral interaction among family members was apparent as each member of Jack’s family was afforded ample space and permission to openly challenge and critique each other’s beliefs as well as raise issues for discussion. Many questions that younger family members had for older family members called for deep reflection, such as decisions around completing a pregnancy if they knew that their child would be gay and if they would have raised Jack any differently if they knew of his gay sexual orientation when he was much younger. The communicative atmosphere in Jack’s family was collaborative with almost no indication of a hierarchical stance. The younger family members were, however, appropriately respectful to older members. This stance that is naturally adopted allowed members to openly voice opinions and in the process redefine meaning for them. Jack’s family’s retelling of their story facilitated their mutual search for understanding to develop a story that had not been told before (Winderman, 1989). As conversations continue, new narratives that emerged about Jack’s family seem to become more optimistic and empowering.

My research questions and the use of reflexivity further engaged Jack’s family in new conversations about their conversations. The use of reflexivity helped family members to step aside from their initial discourse and view it from a different perspective. Hence, each reflexive conversation created new perspectives. The opportunity to be reflexive as one received another family member’s narrative challenged members’ preconceived ideas. My “non-expert” and no “status” stance (Hoffman, 1988) and relying on the epistemology of family members to interpret each other’s narratives allowed space for ideas to evolve. The process of receiving a fellow member’s narrative or epistemology promoted understanding of members’ private reality. Although the focus was largely on the multiple views within Jack’s family, continued use of reflexivity gradually modified the receivers own epistemology as they pondered and questioned what they received. The privileged insight into the private realities of another family member
seemed to contribute to Jack’s family’s overall cohesion in addition to increasing personal disclosure by other members.

The self-disclosure of one family member seemed to either permit or oblige other family members to similarly self-disclose. Either way, the sharing of personal struggles retrospectively increased understanding and cohesion among family members. Many “moments of silence” were observed in Jack’s family interview as members seem to recognize and relate to the experience shared by another member. These moments of “knowing” are what I term “bonding moments” that increased Jack’s family’s cohesion.

*Stories of Empowerment*

Jack’s family’s narratives about their struggle with gay identity also allowed Jack’s family to view the issue as a separate identity, external to the person. This externalization of the “problem” further aided Jack’s family’s ability to derive new options for escaping the oppression of the problem as they worked together to defeat the problem rather than blame each other for it (White & Epston, 1990). Jack’s family’s ability to defeat the oppression that they perceived was synonymous with being gay, increased as family members were embraced by members in their communities. The acceptance they received in their communities empowered members to continue to “risk” coming out. As White (1990) explains, these “unique outcomes” of acceptance help Jack’s family separate from their dominant, “problem-saturated” story that shape their lives and see alternative or neglected aspects of them that led them to describe themselves in a new, empowered story. The construction of one’s own reality can, however, lead troubled families to deny their problem as it momentarily occurred with Jack’s parents who had silently wished that Jack’s gay sexual orientation was a phase that would pass.

As Jack’s family found themselves shifting away from the problem with being gay to recognizing their personal strength and resources, such as Jack’s family’s cohesiveness, they became sensitive to the larger social world that surrounds them. The demonstrated overall movement of Jack’s family from self-centered concern, to concern for the gay person, to a broader social concern for the gay community, is similarly suggested by Griffin et al. (1986) of parental understanding of their situation. Jack’s family’s belief in their family unity (Cramer & Roach, 1988), the willingness to be transparent and self-reflective (Boxer et al., 1991), and the unchanging positive feeling towards their gay family member (Robinson et al., 1989) are central to Jack’s family’s politicizing their personal stand against discrimination of gay individuals.
Summary

The “crisis” of Jack’s sexual orientation disclosure initiated a growth in Jack’s family system. A systems change inevitably required a structural change within Jack’s family to enable Jack’s family system to adapt to the demands of the systemic change. The structural change, in turn, led members into an intrapsychic journey of the “self,” which led to further structural changes. Family members’ natural need to relate to others as they processed both their personal and systemic change, led to the sharing of their stories.

The open sharing and receiving of the multiple perspectives that exist within their system was a bonding process for Jack’s family. The sharing of multiple viewpoints and the collaborative confrontation among family members effected change in members’ personal epistemologies. Besides being a growth enhancing experience for members, narrating their personal stories helped externalize their struggle with their gay identity. Externalization helped depersonalize Jack’s family’s struggle making it more manageable. The stories shared progressively became more optimistic and empowering. It empowered family members who found their “voice” in the process. Family members’ personal “voice” awakened their sensitivity to the social climate around them that initiated social action in some members.

Finally, Jack’s family member’s respect for each other’s journey and process of change that is uniquely different appears to be key to their ability to remain bonded. There is an overall progression from an intrapsychic level to interpersonal, communal, and social engagements as a result of a stress on Jack’s family system. The progression is, however, not sequential as more than one if not all of these levels appear to exist simultaneously at differing magnitudes making the change complex in and of itself.

Conclusions

Coming out to family members, particularly parents, remains a central concern for gay individuals who desire to lead authentic lives (Savin-Williams, 2001). Jack’s family’s coming out process may or may not be typical of rural families with generally positive and affirming family relationships. It does, however, reflect the desire of families to maintain family relations that are positive and healthy.

This study contributes to existing literature in multiple ways. It is an in-depth examination of the complexities of how multiple individuals negotiate rules and accommodate diverse viewpoints within a family system. Further, this study provides insight into a family’s
journey of accepting their gay identity and new roles as members of a “chosen” family. This study is one of the few that utilizes personal narratives of family members, thereby giving a marginalized group a “voice.” Finally, how the reflexive process contributes to a family’s creation of new stories is revealed and elaborated in this work.

Limitations of the Study

First, this study presents a bias in its participation. Participants were elicited via a gay support group where one of Jack’s parents is an active member. Parents in support groups such as PFLAG are typically more open, secure, and accepting than other parents (Savin-Williams, 2001). Furthermore, parents of support groups are more likely to subscribe to the sequence of grieving stages propounded by support groups. Hence, the participants are not likely to be representative of families of sexual-minority children.

Second, the participants lack ethnic diversity. As with most other gay related studies, the participants are a White, middle class, and educated family. Studies of ethnic populations are essentially bicultural in terms of the mainstream heterosexual culture in which they interact and the gay community in which they relate to their gay peers (Allen & Demo, 1995). Such bicultural studies can throw light on the resiliency and creative adaptation in the context of minority group oppression and stigma that is unique to ethnic gay groups (Brown, 1989; Laird, 1993). Finally, as with all qualitative studies, my role as enquirer was not without bias. I come with my own set of assumptions, belief, and values that influences my interpretation of Jack’s family’s narratives. Efforts to be as unbias as possible do not preclude the possibility of bias.

Implications for Clinical Practice

The findings of this study provide the following implications for family therapists and other professionals that work with gay individuals and their families:

1) It is important to note that each stage of a family’s coming out experience may constitute more than one theme, such as integrating gay identity, coming out to community, and awakening to social issues. Furthermore, each family member’s experience is unique making Jack’s family’s overall process rather complex, i.e., there is more to a gay family’s coming out experience than the mere grieving of a loss. Each member of a family comes with an individual perspective of their own and their family’s experience, of which, each is equally valid. Creating the space and time for each member to voice their perspectives and be heard in a respectful way is crucial for Jack’s family’s cohesion.
Such open family dialogue can help family members develop trust in each other as they together create a safe place to be transparent and self-reflexive.

2) Working with a family is more than merely helping them survive their crisis of coming out, but to work towards a long-term vision of developing an acceptable change process in Jack’s family. The goal is not to necessarily arrive at one conclusion for Jack’s family, but to allow the on-going creation of as many “stories” as Jack’s family wills, depending on their individual personalities and comfort with coming out. Jack’s family’s co-creation and recreation of stories facilitates the externalization of the crisis as family members begin to give the crisis a separate identity (White & Epston, 1990), external to Jack’s family. Such externalization can help avoid the exaggeration of the crisis and allow the crisis an opportunity to submerge Jack’s family but rather view it as one facet of Jack’s family’s life.

The depersonalization of the crisis can also enhance Jack’s family’s ability to work together to overcome the crisis without blaming each other. Coaching Jack’s family to avoid blaming and scapegoating is crucial as there is a high likelihood that the sharing of stories as a family will pressure members to conform and accelerate their process of change if members’ stages of coming out differ drastically. The key is to foster support among family members to enable each person to comfortably pace their coming out process while assured of unconditional acceptance in their family.

3) Family’s traditions and religious observations can significantly contribute to Jack’s family’s overall or individual integration of gay identity. Jack’s family’s religious beliefs, as observed in this study, can be an underlying struggle that may be a key obstacle to their understanding and accepting gay culture. Addressing issues of morality and sin with Jack’s family, or referring them to appropriate resources to enable Jack’s family to manage any dichotomy between their gay identity and religious beliefs may be necessary.

4) Jack’s family’s life cycle events that are concurrent in Jack’s family need to be similarly addressed as it can explain Jack’s family’s struggle (Carter & McGoldrick, 1988). In this study, Jack was entering his early adulthood and moving out of the house when he came out. It coincided with Natalie’s mid-life transition. The added stress of learning to incorporate “gay” into one’s identity and the awareness of the self as related to a gay individual, can exaggerate existing stressors.
5) There is the potential of media to inform or misinform family members as discovered in this study. The meaning and messages gathered from media appears to have lasting effects. Family members continue to reconstruct and recycle media messages for their own purpose (Fiske, 1989). The effect or influence of media on Jack’s family however, depends on the meaning that is produced at the point of reception (Bennett, 1983). Incorporating media in family discussions can further help Jack’s family externalize their stories and together co-construct and recreate their stories.

6) Including persons other than members of the gay individual’s family-of-origin in treatment, particularly if they are part of the gay individuals chosen family may be important for treatment. This inclusion can be beneficial especially if the person is gay and can be both a role model for Jack’s family as well as a source of up-to-date information on gay culture. Hal, in this study, for instance, was an invaluable resource for Jack’s family, who, like most other families was reared on myth and stereotypes, and was misinformed about gay individuals and gay culture. Hal, successful in his own right and a contributing citizen to his community, was hope for Jack’s family. He was also the link to various supports in the gay community and in the true spirit of embracing diversity, immersed Jack’s family in a foreign land to experience the meaning of being a minority. Referring Jack’s family to a support group such as PFLAG can be help families make connections with the gay community (Sanders & Kroll, 2000; Savin-Williams, 2001).

7) Although the focus is on the dynamics within Jack’s family as a whole, it is equally important to attend to dyads and triads within Jack’s family that naturally form and take on a life of its own. The tension within these smaller units can create undue stress on Jack’s family unit and may require individual attention. The couple relationship of Natalie and Richard for instance experienced tension as one person moved further along the trajectory of coming out to the point of ardent involvement in social activism that threatened their relationship. Integrating their different stages of coming out into their couple life and preventing unhealthy triangulations from forming within Jack’s family would be an appropriate focus.

8) Normalizing the process of change in Jack’s family after a member comes out as gay can help relieve tension in Jack’s family (Savin-Williams, 2001). This would include acknowledging Jack’s family’s stress from needing to integrate multiple life changes
while simultaneously being respectful of family member’s different personalities and perspectives. Moving Jack’s family towards developing stories of resiliency that empowers Jack’s family to manage amid a heterocentric society is possibly the key to our work as family therapists.

Implications for Future Research

This study provides numerous implications for future research. Two main implications include the influence of media, and gender differences in the coming out process. Media was found to play a rather important role in Jack’s family’s understanding and knowledge about gay culture. Television sitcom Will and Grace, movies such as In and Out, and independent movies as well as advertisements and newspaper media were cited as factors that influenced family members’ perception of gays. Studies including this have not explored the full extent of media’s influence on families’ coming out process. The implied meaning of media’s gay discourses (Cover, 2000) may have a role in helping families externalize their stories and together co-construct and recreate their stories. How media shapes families’ perception of what is gay, and how media’s messages are deciphered can inform practitioners of the potential use of media in their work with gay families.

Second, this study and Greenfield’s (1992) study suggests that male family member’s do not necessarily associate their experience with their coming out process. Jack for instance noticed a change in his father’s quality of communication and degree of acceptance of gay, although his father did not associate these changes to his coming out process. Richard, like many other fathers of gay youth, may be more accepting of their son’s sexual orientation than their mothers (Savin-Williams, 2001) and may not experience a distinct process of change. On the other hand, perhaps more innovative ways of eliciting an understanding of men’s process of change is required. Either way, this is a phenomenon worth exploring.

Additional implications for research includes, ethnographic studies of families in rural locations to substantiate the findings in this study and to provide additional “detailed, wholistic accounts of daily lives of gay and lesbian families” (Laird, 1996, p. 320). The diversity and complexity of gay families are cited as reasons for the need for descriptives of gay family’s daily life from their own standpoint (Brown, 1989) to enhance our understanding of gay families.

Studies that differ in composition, such as single parent families, children of adoptive parents, inclusion of extended families including intergenerational families and more extensive
families-of-choice are similarly required. Rural families that have access to fewer gay-related resources and that are culturally diverse can provide a better understanding of gay families’ experiences. Similarly, longitudinal studies on families in both urban and rural populations that assess the progression of family dynamics over time is lacking in the gay literature (Savin-Williams, 2001).
REFERENCES


