COMING OUT: ONE FAMILY’S STORY

Joyce Alexandria Baptist

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
Human Development
Marriage and Family Therapy Program

Katherine R. Allen, Ph.D., Chair
Fred Piercy, Ph.D.
Anne Prouty, Ph.D.
Karen A. Roberto, Ph.D.
Melanie Uttech, Ph.D.

September 10, 2002
Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: Gay families, coming out, family process

Copyright 2002, Joyce Alexandria Baptist
COMING OUT: ONE FAMILY’S STORY

JOYCE ALEXANDRIA BAPTIST

ABSTRACT

This case study elicits the process of coming out of a 6 member family-of-choice of an adult gay man in rural New Hampshire. 27.5 hours of face-to-face interviews were conducted with the family individually and collectively. Reflexivity, as a technique, was used extensively. Four themes were identified: Embracing gay identity, integrating as a family, building social networks, and social awakening. This study addresses the complexities of how multiple individuals negotiate rules and accommodate diverse viewpoints within a family system, provides insight into a family’s journey of accepting their gay identity, utilizes personal narratives of family members, and reveals how the reflexive process contributes to a family’s creation of new stories. Implications for clinical practice and future research are discussed.
Dedications

To my parents:
Maryann Jee Nyuk Phatt who sowed in me the value of education, and
the late Leonard John Baptist who loved me unconditionally.

To Jack and his family:
May your testimony of family love and resiliency
be an inspiration to other families who struggle with identity.
Acknowledgements

My teachers

“A teacher if indeed wise does not bid you enter the house of wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind.” Khalil Gibran.

The process of preparing for this dissertation began when I first came to the United States in 1997 to pursue my master’s degree at Loyola University of Chicago. I thank Loyola’s faculty, particularly Drs. Edward Quinlan, William Schmidt, Suzette Speight, Marilyn Susman and Elizabeth Vera, for igniting my passion in research and in the study of families and diversity.

Needless to say, my passion for research and diversity grew as I continued my academic career at Virginia Tech. I am grateful to have had such high caliber faculty that supported, challenged and encouraged the pursuit of this study. Drs. Katherine Allen, Fred Piercy, Anne Prouty, Karen Roberto and Melanie Uttech who form my committee, and Dr. Kusum Singh, thank you for believing in me and for showing me how to venture beyond my thought paradigm.

I especially acknowledge my advisor Dr. Katherine Allen, who extended herself beyond the call of duty, groomed and challenged my scholarly ability, and kept me connected to the Virginia community while I researched in New Hampshire. Thank you for your dedication and guidance. Your mentorship is the blueprint for my role as mentor to others.

I extend my appreciation to my clinical internship supervisor Dr. William Gunn, at the Dartmouth/Hitchcock Residency Program in New Hampshire, who generously offered his time to my dissertation. Thank you for keeping me focused and for providing valuable feedback and suggestions. I also thank the entire internship program for their flexibility in accommodating my requests for research time, and the graduate program at Virginia Tech for their support and teamwork.

A special recognition goes out to Catherine, Jack, Hal, Natalie and Richard who readily shared their lives for this study and who taught me about being family. I thank each one of you for your generous time, your spirit of openness, and for embracing me into your wonderful family.
My family

“Family constitutes the primary, fundamental and irreplaceable community.” John Paul II.

My admiration and gratitude goes out to my mother, Maryann Jee, my siblings, Christine, Florence, Leo and Steven Baptist, and my extended family for supporting my studies in the United States. I am grateful for your efforts to maintain and strengthen our relationship from across the shores. I attribute my success to your reassuring love.

To all the children in my life: Alicia, Anusha, Clement, Desmond, Devia, Isaac, Maryann, Navin, Preyin, Rachel, Vanessa, Vinod, and others to come, you are my inspiration. It is in knowing that you are our future generations that I strive to preserve and extend the meaning of families so you may experience its joys.

My friends

“Your friend is your needs answered.” Khalil Gibran.

I thank my friends for their support and friendship. Christopher Sweeney, who helped me overcome “writer’s block” and who prescribed “time offs” from writing, thank you for caring. Kit Ng, thank you for your encouragement and for reminding me to respect my pace.

Fr. Dayal Jaganath, Sr. Felicia Matola, Fr. Egerton Perera, and Fr. Joseph Thelekkatt, thank you for pastoral care, love and believe in me that helped me manage the demands of graduate school. Christine Fruhauf, Karla Soukup, Jennifer Sparks, Stephanie Walsh, Richard White, and all my other friends and course mates from Loyola University of Chicago and Virginia Tech, I am honored to have learned with you and from you.

My dear friends – Doris Alexius, Beatrice and Bertille Charles, Lawrence John, Beatrice Jonathan, Carina Lai, Pamela Lopez, Katherine Mathew, Grace Ng, Bruno Pereira, Benedict Raj, Freddie Viaz, Michael Voon, Maria Yan, Amy Yang, and all other members of my Malaysian community, thank you for believing in me and accompanying me on the road less traveled.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ii
Dedications iii
Acknowledgements iv

Chapter Page

1. Introduction 1
   Statement of the problem 1
   Purpose of the study 2
   Theoretical frameworks 3
   Research questions 4
   Operational definition of key terms and concepts 5

2. Literature Review 6
   Overview 6
   The decision to come out 6
   Effects of coming out on families 8
   Beyond the parent – child dyad 11
   Critical analysis of literature 13
   Significance of proposed study to existing work 14

3. Methodology 16
   Research method 16
      Case study 16
      Feminist research 17
      Reflexivity 18
   Role of the researcher 19
   Participants 21
      Selection process 21
      Jack’s family 21
   Data collection 22
   Data analysis 24
4. Findings

Prelude: The struggle to come out 29
Embracing gay identity 30
Overcoming homonegativity 31
Seeking information on gay culture 36
Integrating as a family 41
The bonding of Jack’s family 42
Sharing multiple realities 46
Building social networks 51
Seeking community acceptance 52
The coming out of Jack’s family 56
Social awakening 61
Self-identifying as a minority 61
Politicizing a personal stand 63
Summary 69

5. Discussion, Conclusions, and Implications 71

Introduction 71
Discussion of findings 71
Growth of Jack’s family system 71
Structural change of Jack’s family 72
Individual’s personal process 74
Sharing multiple perspectives 75
Stories of empowerment 77
Summary 78

Conclusions 78
Limitations of the study 79
Implications for clinical practice 79
Implications for future research 82

References 84

Appendices

A. Application for approval of research involving human subjects
B. Informed consent for participants in research projects involving human subjects
C. Initial interview guide
D. Jack’s family geneogram
E. Coding scheme
F. Exhibit of physical locations
G. Resources
H. Cover letter to participants requesting feedback and insight

Vitae