Talking About Family

Disclosure Practices of Adults Raised by Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Parents

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Although a growing literature exists on children of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) parents, little is known about these children's experiences as adults. Of interest is how these individuals negotiate disclosure of their parents' sexual orientation. This qualitative study of 42 adults raised by LGB parents explores this issue. Participants grew up in a diverse range of contexts: Some were always aware of their family's nontraditional status, some were told in childhood, and others were never explicitly told. As adults, participants described a number of reasons for coming out about their family, including a desire to educate, a desire to "screen out" homophobic individuals, and a need for openness in their relationships. Several participants did not disclose about their families at all, and several told only when necessary. Findings are discussed in terms of the diversity inherent among adult children of LGB parents and implications for practice, policy, and research.

Keywords: gay parents; disclosure; children; family; queer

A slowly growing literature exists on children raised by lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) parents (e.g., Chan, Brooks, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998; Golombok et al., 2003; Wainright, Russell, & Patterson, 2004). Much of this literature has been comparative—that is, it compares children raised by LGB parents to children raised by heterosexual parents on a number of constructs, including psychological well-being (Chan et al., 1998; Golombok et al., 2003; Tasker & Golombok, 1997), cognitive functioning (Flaks, Ficher, Masterpasqua, & Joseph, 1995), gender development (Golombok et al., 2003;

Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983), and sexual behavior and sexual orientation (Tasker & Golombok, 1997). Although many studies in this research area have been criticized for methodological limitations (including small sample sizes and a tendency to focus on White, middle-class families), the research as a whole is consistent in demonstrating few differences in emotional, social, and developmental outcomes among children of LGB parents compared to children of heterosexual parents (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Moreover, the findings of recent studies, which have utilized more representative samples (e.g., Golombok et al., 2003; Wainright et al., 2004), have been notably consistent with the findings of earlier studies. More studies that utilize representative, diverse samples are obviously needed. However, studies that go beyond a comparative framework are equally as important, as reliance on this approach has limited the scope and direction of the field. Fewer studies have been explicitly aimed at exploring processes that are unique to this family structure (Patterson, 1992), although inroads are being made in this area (e.g., Goldberg & Allen, in press; Oswald, 2002).

One important process that is unique to children raised by LGB parents concerns the issue of disclosure: Children raised by LGB parents face decisions about how open or public to be with regard to information about their "unique" family structure. People who identify as nonheterosexual are not the only ones who must "come out"—their children are also faced with the question of whether to (and how to) come out to peers, teachers, and other adults about their families (Garner, 2004). In deciding whether to come out, children must weigh the potential risks and benefits of disclosure. Although they may risk rejection by telling others about their families, a positive consequence of disclosure might be relief from the burden of secrecy that these children sometimes bear (Baptiste, 1987; Pennington, 1987). Studies find that children who are encouraged to keep their parents' sexual orientation a secret tend to exhibit symptoms of depression and may feel lonely and isolated (Baptiste, 1987; Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993; Pennington, 1987).

Disclosure Practices of Children of LGB Parents

Some research has explored disclosure issues among children of LGB parents (Bozett, 1987, 1988; Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993; Tasker & Golombok, 1997). Tasker and Golombok (1997) conducted a longitudinal study of lesbian mothers and their children and found that 61% of young adults told at least one close friend about their lesbian mother or mothers; 39% did not disclose about their family status to anyone. Feeling

proud of one's family identity and viewing one's parent's sexual orientation as a political matter (and as a reason to educate others) were associated with disclosure. I also found that young adults who felt their mother was sensitive to their need for discretion (e.g., they allowed them to choose how and when to tell friends) reported feeling more proud of their family identity. This suggests that children whose mothers recognized the importance of allowing them some control over information about their families developed more positive feelings about their family and in turn felt greater comfort being out about their families.

The importance of allowing young people to feel in control of the information their peers receive about their families was also noted by Bozett (1987, 1988). Bozett (1987), a researcher of children of gay fathers, suggests that some children use social control strategies to maintain a public image and avoid harassment on the basis of their parent's sexual orientation. These include boundary control strategies (e.g., not inviting friends over, discouraging one's parents from attending a school event together), preemptive disclosure (disclosure performed for the purpose of preparing someone who will likely found out), and nondisclosure (simply not telling). Bozett suggests that children are more likely to use control strategies if they perceive their parent's sexual orientation as being relatively obvious, if they do not identify with the gay parent, if they do not live with the gay parent, and if they are young (and therefore possess little control).

Little information is available about how disclosure practices continue to unfold past young adulthood. Given their unique family structure and the political and social implications of acknowledging one's parents' sexual orientation, coming out will likely continue to be relevant for many adults raised by LGB parents, even though most adults will no longer live with their parents or even in the same geographical area. Some adults will not feel comfortable allowing others to maintain the heteronormative assumption that everyone has a mother and a father and will feel prompted to make political disclosures—that is, disclosures to promote social change through education (Cain, 1991a, 1991b). Tasker and Golombok's (1997) research suggests that one's family pride may lead some adults to disclose about their family structure even when there is no imminent chance of being discovered.

Clearly, greater incentive to disclose will likely be present for more intimate relationships. Self-disclosure is an act of intimacy and functions to both deepen and maintain relationships (Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004). As Goffman (1963) noted, the failure to reveal details about oneself can lead to feelings of guilt on the part of the individual who chooses not to disclose for fear of stigma and a sense of betrayal on the part of the friend or significant

other. Just as self-disclosure serves the function of building and enhancing relationships, secrecy may serve to weaken relationships. Furthermore, relationships with a romantic partner, and with the partner's family, will typically necessitate some level of disclosure, particularly if one is at the stage of considering marriage (and therefore preparing for a meeting or union of each partner's family). Indeed, as one plans a wedding, it may be very difficult to conceal the sexual orientation of one's parent or parents, particularly if they are partnered. And yet, some adults may choose not to disclose their family structure unless absolutely necessary because of their own internalized homophobia and/or the homophobia of those around them. Experiences with teasing or rejection (as a child or as an adult) may further lead to disidentification with one's family status (Tasker & Golombok, 1997).

Other than Tasker and Golombok (1997) and Bozett (1987), few researchers have explored predictors of or reasons for disclosure among children of LGB parents, and no research has explored disclosure practices of adults raised by LGB parents, although Garner (2004), a journalist, interviewed approximately 50 adults with one or more nonheterosexual parent for her book *Families Like Mine: Children of Gay Parents Tell it Like It Is*. Although her research did not focus on disclosure practices, she reports data that suggest that, consistent with Tasker and Golombok's (1997) findings on young adults, some adults are motivated to disclose based on a strong sense of family pride. However, this topic was not discussed in depth or at length, and no other salient factors relating to disclosure were noted. Little research has explored the experiences of adults raised by LGB parents in general. One notable exception is Saffron's (1998) investigation of adults' perceived advantages of being raised by lesbian mothers. In sum, we know little about how growing up in this family structure shapes adult decisions and developmental trajectories. This research is important on practical and theoretical grounds as we attempt to develop a sense of the life course of individuals raised by LGB parents.

Predictors of Disclosure Among Sexual Minorities

Of note is the literature on the coming-out process of sexual minorities and the literature on predictors of disclosure among sexual minorities, as these may be relevant in considering processes of and predictors of disclosure among children of LGB parents. Perhaps the most dominant framework for understanding the coming-out process is Cass's (1979) stage model. According to Cass's model, individuals move from confusion to acceptance

and tolerance to pride and synthesis of their LGB identity. Thus, the coming-out process is conceived of as relatively linear and continuous. Herek (1996) and others (e.g., Boon & Miller, 1999) have addressed reasons or motivations for coming out, such as (a) to improve interpersonal relationships, (b) to enhance mental health (by decreasing secrecy and the strain surrounding one's efforts to maintain the secret), and (c) to change society's attitudes regarding homosexuality. According to Herek (1996), LGB people consider a number of factors in deciding whether or not to come out, including (a) social context or concerns about homophobia, (b) how well they know the individual at hand, (c) the likelihood of continuing the relationship with the individual, and (d) the ease of concealment.

Cass (1979) and Herek (1996) offer useful frameworks for considering disclosure and coming-out processes. However, it is important to recognize that coming out is an ongoing process for sexual minorities and, presumably, adult children of LGB parents (Oswald, 2002; Rhoades, 1995). Moreover, this process is not necessarily linear: Coming out is often marked by contra-diction and change and both pride and shame (e.g., Dindia, 1998). Thus, it is expected that participants' narratives may reflect change, tension, and strug-gle with regard to their disclosure practices rather than predictable and linear patterns of disclosure and nondisclosure.

The goal of the current article is to advance our understanding of adults raised as children by one or more lesbian, gay, or bisexual parent, with special attention to how these men and women negotiate disclosure of their family structure in their adult relationships. Thus, adults with one or more LGB parents were interviewed about their experiences of disclosure as adults.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are adults' feelings about their parents' sexual orientation? How do their feelings change over the course of their lives, and how do they inform their disclosure practices?
2. How do participants explain their disclosure or nondisclosure in adulthood? That is, what reasons or motivations do they invoke?
3. Given that individuals' ideas about the meaning and consequences of dis-closure are a function of their own life experience and their interactions with others, (how) do individuals' disclosure practices vary by context? Are there situations in which individuals do not disclose or persons to whom they do not disclose?

Theoretical Perspectives

Three overarching theoretical perspectives inform the current investigation: a symbolic interactionist perspective, a life course perspective, and queer theory. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes the interaction between the person and his or her environment (Goffman, 1959; Rose, 1962) and posits that people develop a sense of self through interaction, which in turn influences motivation (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). According to this perspective, people are constantly in a process of interpretation and definition as they move from situation to situation; by extension, situations have meanings only through people's interpretations and definitions. Furthermore, one's life experience inevitably influences one's interpretations, and these interpretations in turn determine one's actions. Thus, in the current study, participants' previous experiences (e.g., the timing of their parents' coming out, their own reaction, previous experiences with disclosure or nondisclosure) and their interpretation of their immediate context (e.g., perceived homophobia of others, necessity of disclosure) may influence whether or not they disclose. For example, a man who was raised by two lesbian mothers who were secretive about their sexual orientation may be less comfortable with disclosure than a man raised in a household characterized by open communication about his lesbian mothers' sexual orientation. Likewise, the degree of perceived homophobia in one's immediate network will likely shape the degree to which one feels comfortable sharing information about one's family structure.

A life course perspective also guides the current investigation. Life course theory encourages us to recognize that understanding development requires awareness of not only the broader contexts in which it occurs but the particular life stage that individual is in, how that stage is interpreted by the individual, and how the individual changes over time (Bengston & Allen, 1993; Elder, 1998). This suggests that processes of disclosure will change as a function of life stage and that different factors will be implicated in one's decision making about disclosure at different points in the life course. One will inevitably consider different factors in deciding whether to disclose depending on if one is a child, an adolescent, a young adult in college, a young adult thinking about marriage and career, an adult in midlife, or an older adult. A woman with a gay father will have greater control over whether she discloses as an adult compared to when she was a child but may choose to disclose about her family because of family pride and/or other reasons or beliefs that emerge during adolescence and adulthood. Like symbolic interactionism, life course theory emphasizes the (lifelong) interaction of the individual and the social context but expands this notion to include the concept of linked lives:

The social network in which the individual lives and develops (e.g., one's family, one's spouse) constitutes a context in and of itself. One's family structure continues to represent a relevant context of development and identity, even as one ages; thus, although a woman may no longer live with her lesbian mother, she likely continues to have a relationship with her. The quality and dynamics of that relationship likely influence the degree and type of disclosures that she will make about her mother and about her family.

Finally, some scholars have called for a more critical examination of heteronormativity as an ideology that treats traditional gender roles, heterosexuality, and family traditionalism as normative (Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005; Warner, 1993). "Male" and "female" are regarded as the only "natural" or real genders; individuals whose gender identity or gender expression does not conform to male or female are considered deviant. Similarly, heterosexuality is regarded as "normal," and other forms of sexual behavior are pathologized. Family relationships that are based on biological or legal ties are considered legitimate, whereas other forms of relationships are marginalized. Increasingly, family studies scholars have challenged us to consider the utility of queer theory as a theoretical framework that can be used to deconstruct these binaries and highlight the complexity of gender, sexuality, and family relations (Oswald et al., 2005). The word *queer* itself has been reclaimed by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender activists and implies a self-conscious deconstruction of heteronormativity and the arbitrary binaries of sex, gender, and family (Phelan, 1997). Through acts and activities that resist or defy gender norms, normal sexuality, and/or traditional family relationships, individuals deconstruct and reconstruct gender, sex, and family in complex ways. Adult children of LGB parents, then, may "queer the family" through explicit disclosure of their family structure, such that their families (who challenges traditional notions of sexuality and family) is rescued from invisibility and named as authentic. Through disclosure, they out themselves as living representations of the heterogeneity of contemporary family forms. On the other hand, some adult children may regard disclosure of their family structure as a threat to their social status and to the self that they wish to put forth in social interactions (Goffman, 1959). In this way, they experience the pressures of heteronormativity, anticipate the social consequences of such queering processes, and stay silent.

Method

I interviewed 42 adults with one or more LGB parents using a semistructured interview format. Open-ended questions that addressed participants'

disclosure practices as adults and their experiences growing up with a non-heterosexual parents were asked.

The Sample

Inclusion criteria for the study were: (a) participants must be 18 or older and (b) participants must have one or more lesbian, gay, or bisexual parents. Several main recruitment methods were used. The study was advertised in the newsletters and on the Web site of two major organizations that are geared toward children of gay parents: COLAGE (Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere) and Families Like Mine, an organization founded and run by Abigail Garner. Of course, recruitment of participants through organizations specifically geared toward adult children of LGB parents introduces clear bias in sampling, as adults who visit the Web site and receive the newsletters associated with these organizations may be more likely to identify with and acknowledge their status as a child of a gay parent than adults with gay parents who do not make such efforts. Thus, to minimize or lessen such sample bias, several additional methods of recruitment were utilized. The study was advertised by numerous PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) chapters throughout the country and by Rainbow Families, an LGB organization serving families in the Midwest. In this way, individuals other than adult children of LGB parents were specifically asked to share information about the study with individuals they knew who might qualify for participation. The researcher's contact information was included with the study description, and potential participants were asked to contact the principal investigator for more information. At that point, the study was explained to the participant. If interested, he or she was mailed a consent form ensuring confidentiality and detailing the conditions of participation. The participant then completed a telephone interview with the principal investigator.

Description of the Sample

Participants ranged in age from 19 to 50. The mean age of participants was 30; the median age was 28. The sample consisted of 35 women and 7 men. Eight adults (5 women and 3 men) had a gay father, 23 adults (21 women and 2 men) had a lesbian mother, 2 women was raised by a bisexual mother, and 9 participants (7 women, 2 men) were raised by 2 lesbian mothers (Table 1). Of the 9 participants raised by lesbian mothers, 4 participants' mothers had been together since they were born, and 5 had been raised by their mother and a partner since early childhood. The remaining 33 participants' parents either (a) came out to them during their childhood or (b) never officially came out

Table 1
Participant Gender by Parent Type (Bisexual Mother,
Lesbian Mother, Lesbian Mothers, Gay Father)

Participant Gender	Parent Type				
	Bisexual Mother	Lesbian Mother	Lesbian Mothers	Gay Father	Total
Women	2	21	7	5	35
Men	0	2	2	3	7
Total	2	23	9	8	42

Note: $N = 42$.

to them, but participants knew of their sexual orientation via obvious indicators such as the presence of a same-sex partner in the home. More detailed information about these different contexts will be provided in the results.

Except for 3 multiracial individuals, all participants were European American. Two participants lived in the United Kingdom, and 1 participant lived in Canada. Of the 39 participants living in the United States, 35% resided on the East Coast, 20% lived on the West Coast, 19% lived in the Midwest, and 17% lived in the South. The educational level of participants was varied: two participants reported less than a high school education, 11 participants had completed high school, 3 participants had completed some college, 18 participants had a bachelor's degree, 6 participants had a master's degree, and 2 participants had doctoral degrees. A total of 35 individuals identified as heterosexual, 4 women identified as lesbians, 2 women identified as bisexual, and 1 biological male identified as gender queer.

Data Collection Process and Open-Ended Questions

Participants were interviewed over the telephone during the summer and fall of 2005. Interviews typically lasted between 40 and 50 minutes. Interviews were transcribed to capture participants' thoughts and feelings in their own words. The following open-ended questions were asked:

1. Tell me the story of what it was like growing up with a gay parent. What was it like for you? How and when did you know that your mother(s)/father(s) was/were gay?
2. Were there certain periods that were easier or more difficult? If so, when and how?

3. Tell me how you talk about your family. Do you tend to be out about your family? That is, do you tend to disclose to people that you have a gay father/lesbian/bisexual mother? Why/why not? In what ways has this changed over time, if at all?

Data Analysis Process

Methodological framework. I conducted a thematic analysis of the data (Bogdan & Bicklen, 2003). A thematic analysis involves a thorough exploration of recurrent themes and patterns in the data to create a coding system to organize the data. Life course, symbolic interactionist, and queer theories guided my exploration and coding of the data. For example, special attention was paid to elements of time (e.g., the timing of parents' disclosure, change in participants' disclosure practices, key transition points or turning points). Similarly, participants' interpretations of why they disclosed, and the apparent role of disclosure and others' responses to disclosure in participants' self-definition and self-image, also received special attention. Finally, tensions between heteronormativity and queering were also a focus of the analysis.

Coding. I began by reading transcripts of each respondent's data multiple times. I then began the coding process with open coding, or line-by-line coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This involves examining each line of narrative and defining events or actions within it. This approach led to refinement and specification of emerging categories or codes. Second, I engaged in focused coding, which uses initial codes that frequently reappear to sort the data (e.g., pride and shame). This coding is more conceptual in nature than initial coding (Charmaz, 2003). The categories that emerge are those that best synthesize the data. I then applied the coding scheme to the data, which allowed for the identification of more descriptive coding categories and generation of themes for which there was the most substantiation in the data. For example, the codes pride and shame, which came up in various forms throughout participants' narratives, were expanded to capture change over time (e.g., pride to shame and back to pride) and unusual or complex responses that did not fit into the scheme (e.g., pride and shame: back and forth). Categories were also examined in relation to one another. For example, the context of parental disclosure emerged as an important category; codes within this category (e.g., always knew that my parents were gay, found out in childhood) were examined in relation to other categories, such as reasons for disclosure (e.g., to educate others, preemptive disclosure). I continued to reapply the coding scheme to the data and made subsequent revisions until all data were

accounted for with the codes. The coding scheme was revised eight times. The final coding scheme was peer reviewed by a scholar in qualitative methodology and analysis who read random segments of participant transcripts and evaluated the scheme against the data. Based on this reviewer's comments, the coding scheme underwent a ninth and final revision. The findings are organized around the final coding scheme.

Results

Four main sets of data analysis are presented. First, the contexts of parental disclosure are discussed, with special attention to timing of disclosure and participants' initial reactions to disclosure. Second, participants' feelings about their parents' sexual orientation are addressed, with attention to change over time. In the third section, participants' motivations for disclosure are explored. Finally, tensions and contradictions in participants' narratives are discussed.

The Contexts of Parental Disclosure

Five types of participants emerged, with properties along two dimensions: temporality (when participants' parents came out) and relationality (the degree to which parents were open or secretive about their sexuality). Table 2 presents the frequencies for these five groups.

Knew since birth. Nine participants (7 women, 2 men) noted that they had always known that their parent or parents were gay; that is, they grew up with this knowledge. Four of these participants (all women) were raised by 2 lesbian mothers from birth or their early years. Three women and 2 men reported that their parents had divorced when they were very young (1 or 2 years old) and in turn had grown up knowing that their mother was a lesbian (2 women) or that their father was gay (2 men, 1 woman). All 9 participants described an atmosphere of open communication about their parents' sexual orientation. Their parents' sexual orientation and their nontraditional family structure were constructed as normal and healthy; at the same time, participants were warned about the stigma attached to these identities. Stated Kerry, a 24-year-old heterosexual woman with 2 lesbian mothers:

> My parents have been together for 28 years and had me through insemination. Probably when I was able to kind of the grasp the concept [they told me]. . . . I'm going to say around 3 maybe? It was kind of like, I was in playgroups and my

Table 2
Context of Disclosure, Feelings About Parent's Sexual Orientation, and Reasons for Disclosure: Frequencies for Men and Women

	Women	Men	Total
The contexts of parental disclosure			
Knew since birth	7	2	9
Knew since childhood	15	4	19
Knew since childhood; family secret	5	0	5
Knew since childhood; not acknowledged	3	0	3
Knew since childhood; parent denied	5	1	6
Total			42
Feelings about parental sexual orientation			
Intergenerational pride	17	4	21
Pride-secrecy	6	0	6
Intergenerational shame	5	1	6
Shame despite pride	3	2	5
Pride and shame	4	0	4
Total			42
Reasons for disclosure			
Education and activism	16	2	18
Litmus test	8	1	9
I won't hide	6	0	6
Preemptive disclosure	4	2	6
Nondisclosure	2	1	3
Total			42

Note: $N = 42$.

parents told me, forewarned me. I never really thought it was unusual throughout my childhood years. I didn't know anyone with gay parents but I really just assumed that anyone could have them.

Here, Kerry notes that her parents "forewarned" her. Among individuals who recalled discussion about their parents' sexual orientation for as long as they could remember, many expressed that early communication helped to prepare them for the questions that they faced from peers, teachers, and neighbors. Although several recalled painful periods during childhood when they were teased about their families, they could "always go home and talk about it, which helped." In this way, participants' interactions with their parents offset their interactions with the outside world, facilitating a more positive interpretation of their nontraditional family structure.

Most participants in this group did not recall any one incident in which their parent came out to them; rather, it was the subject of ongoing discussion and something that they gradually came to understand fully. In describing their response to their emergent understanding of what it meant to have gay parents, they all remarked that it was "just normal"—that is, they did not question it or even recall any reaction to the news. Only later did they learn that their parents' sexual orientation was not considered normal by some people.

Knew since childhood. A second group of 19 individuals (15 women, 4 men) reported that their parents had come out to them during their childhood or adolescence, typically in the context of a divorce. In some cases, participants recalled that there had been signs (e.g., love letters, frequent visits by a same-sex friend) that prompted them to confront their parent, who confirmed their suspicions. Deanna, a 22-year-old heterosexual woman, reported that her father's attendance at a gay-themed event prompted her to ask him if he was gay. She was about 10 years old at the time:

> I was like, "Dad, are you gay?" He was like, "Yes I am!" He was very emotional. I was like, OK, I don't really care. To me it wasn't a big deal.

Participants who were told in childhood described several different initial responses. Twelve participants (10 women, 2 men) recalled that they responded to their parents' coming out relatively positively. It was "no big deal," and they "just accepted it." Of note is that 4 of these participants grew up in what they deemed very progressive and gay-friendly communities; two women noted that their parents had many gay friends who were frequent visitors to their homes. This exposure facilitated greater acceptance of sexual minorities; in turn, their parents' coming out did not carry the stigma that it may have in more conservative communities.

A second initial reaction described by 7 of these participants was that of fear and shame. Seven participants (5 women, 2 men) recalled feeling that, as one woman put it, "It was weird . . . . Everyone else had 'normal parents.'" It is notable that of these 7 participants, 2 emphasized that they were brought up in religious, conservative communities, and 2 highlighted the fact that their extended families was extremely homophobic. Individuals' families' reactions may have influenced their own reaction. Stated Dan, a 29-year-old heterosexual man:

> My dad came out to me when I was a kid . . . maybe 6? I guess, I guess in a way I was kind of ashamed of it when I was younger . . . . My stepfather had

a very negative attitude towards homosexuals. My whole family is really conservative actually.

Here, Dan acknowledges that his father's "replacement" in the family was openly homophobic. The input of another male that was staunchly opposed to homosexuality clearly influenced Dan's own emerging ideas about and construction of homosexuality.

Knew since childhood, family secret. Five women noted that their parents were out to them but not to the outside world. Their parents disclosed their sexual orientation to them during their childhood but indicated that this knowledge was not to be shared with outsiders. Said Bethany, a 32-year-old heterosexual woman:

> My mom was in a relationship from the time I was about 12 . . . . It became evident. We just kind of kept the secret. We knew we weren't supposed to tell anyone either. My mom really did keep her relationship a secret, like she didn't want anyone to know. It was just how she portrayed it . . . . She didn't ever mention it.

Two of these women noted that they had responded positively to the news of their parents' sexual orientation: They simply accepted it. The other three women recalled some sense of shame and fear. They noted that they internalized the sense that something was indeed wrong with being gay if it was to be kept a secret. Thus, the homophobia they felt was intergenerational in nature—it was passed down to them from their parents, who felt unable to be out to the world. In turn, they took on their parents' secret. Said Vivian, a 29-year-old heterosexual woman:

> I couldn't tell anyone at school. So, life became really hiding. I would go home and I was stuck with her. There was a lot of uncomfortableness, a lot of secrecy.

Knew since childhood, never acknowledged. Three women noted that their parents never really came out to them, but they knew that their parent was gay since childhood. It was not secret, per se, but it was something that "no one talked about . . . but we knew." Rose, a 30-year-old heterosexual woman stated:

> My parents got divorced when I was 8. They didn't really tell us—they didn't not tell us, they just didn't say anything. By the time I was 9 or 10,

> I knew on some level that my dad shared a bedroom with a man, they lived
> in the same apartment . . . but no one ever . . . we just sort of knew . . . and
> we were OK with it. We just didn't question it.

Rose and another woman reported that they accepted their mothers' lesbianism, despite the lack of official disclosure. A third woman, Amanda, reported feeling uncomfortable and ashamed. In the absence of disclosure or communication, Amanda developed her own ideas about what it meant to be gay, which were likely influenced by society, peers, and the media. Moreover, in the absence of any acknowledgment, she also learned that being gay was something to keep hidden—a secret that if disclosed would reflect poorly on her family and on her.

Knew since childhood, parent denied. Six adults (5 women, 1 man) noted that their parents actively denied their sexual orientation and/or refused to discuss it, despite obvious signs to the contrary. Several of these participants described the longstanding presence of another same-sex adult in the household during much of their childhood, who was never explicitly acknowledged as their mother's partner but labeled only as a friend or roommate. Exclaimed Johanna, a 36-year-old heterosexual woman:

> I remember asking her, point blank, if she was a lesbian, and she still denied
> it. Because she came from a generation where, if you put a term to something,
> if you label it, if you name it, it exists. If you don't say it, it doesn't exist.

Here, Johanna clearly implies that although her mother refuses to name it, she has named it—that is, it is real to her even in the absence of her mother's validation or acknowledgement.

Interestingly, only one of these adults, a man in his late 20s, reported childhood shame about his or her parents' sexual orientation. Rather, the reaction that all 5 women described was one of acceptance—and exasperation at their parents' refusal to be honest and confirm what was obviously true. These women actively questioned and resisted their parents' denial, refusing to simply accept their parents' silence and in turn join them in the closet.

All 14 adults whose homes were characterized by secrecy noted that the lack of disclosure left them vulnerable in terms of handling questions from neighbors and peers. This is in contrast to participants who had the benefit of open communication in their households. Joyce, a 23-year-old woman who identified as heterosexual, recalled the shame of finding out about her mother from a classmate.

This girl . . . knew, and she mentioned it to me, but I told her that you know, that she was lying. You know, you don't think of your parents that way! So that was rough.

Of note is that these participants' ages varied significantly, suggesting that their parents' secrecy was not simply a generational phenomenon.

Life Course Patterns and Transitions

Of course, participants' feelings about their parents' sexual orientation inevitably changed during the course of their lives. As they grew up, developed an independent sense of identity, moved away, and started their own families, their feelings about their families of origin sometimes shifted. Next, participants' current feelings about their LGB parents are discussed (Table 2).

Intergenerational pride. A total of 21 participants (17 women, 4 men) reported that as adults, they felt a sense of pride in their parents and families. Many noted that their parents' own courage had helped them to see how their family was special, not just different. In turn, many acknowledged that they had internalized a sense of identification with and loyalty to the gay community. Of importance is that all 9 individuals who grew up knowing that their parent or parents were gay reported a strong sense of pride in adulthood; such lifetime exposure had fostered in them a deep loyalty to and acceptance of their parents and families. Stated Valerie, a 35-year-old heterosexual woman:

I am very open about my situation. I don't wear a billboard on my chest, and I'm not going to walk around on the street telling complete strangers, but I never hide it and I'm not ashamed of it. Because it's made me who I am, I'm very proud of it, I'm very proud of my mother. She was a great mom.

From pride to shame and back again. Of these 21 participants, 8 adults (7 women, 1 man) noted that although they recalled an initial sense of comfort with their parents' sexual orientation (4 always knew, and 4 found out in childhood), this was transformed once they reached school age. Facing negative reactions from peers, peers' parents, and teachers, they developed a less positive interpretation of what it meant to be gay and in turn disidentified themselves from their parents to protect themselves from the negative implications their parents' gayness had on their own self-image. They began telling fewer people about their family status and "turned inward," as one woman put it. However, in late adolescence and early adulthood, they

reclaimed their sense of pride. Often, the turning point happened in high school or college, when they told a friend or boyfriend about their family and received positive or neutral reaction. Such positive mirroring gave them the courage to be out about their family structure and to insist on honesty in their relationships. Stated Catherine, a 25-year-old bisexual woman:

> I finally told my best friend at the end of high school. The day I told her she laughed at me and said, "How stupid do you think I am?" She said, "Everybody knew, nobody cared . . . the ones that cared just stopped talking to you. We love you and we don't care." And so honestly from that point on I've been like, "My mom's a lesbian, she's gay, if you have a problem with it, you don't need to be around me."

Always proud. In contrast, 13 of these 21 participants noted that their sense of pride was relatively stable over time. Despite the heterosexism and homophobia they encountered in school and their communities, they maintained a strong sense of intergenerational pride in their families.

Pride despite secrecy. Six women noted that they had developed a strong sense of pride in spite of the fact that they grew knowing that their parents' sexual orientation was a secret: in four cases, their parents denied their sexuality, and in two cases, knowledge of their mothers' lesbianism was kept strictly within the home. Their parents' shame and fear were not passed down; rather, these women questioned their parents' silence and encouraged them to speak up and be more out. They received but did not internalize the message that being gay is shameful. As adults, they often found themselves more out than their parents, something that made them somewhat uncomfortable.

Intergenerational shame. Six individuals (5 women, 1 man) reported feelings of shame that they identified as intergenerational shame, passed down from their parents, who could never fully accept or acknowledge their own sexuality. These 6 individuals grew up in homes characterized by secrecy and silence surrounding the issue of their parents' sexual orientation, and, in turn, all reported initial feelings of discomfort in response to knowledge of their parents' sexual orientation. These early feelings of shame continued into their adulthood. Andrew, a 35-year-old heterosexual man who acknowledged that he had struggled with his father's sexual orientation as a child, stated:

> We found out when I was about 11. My father never officially came out to us. He came out and went back in again at different times in his life. I don't believe he could truly accept it himself.

Andrew and others noted that they continued to struggle with what it meant for their parents to be gay. Andrew, and 2 women, noted that their parents' sexual orientation had made them more self-conscious about their own sexuality and sexual orientation, and to reflect on what (negative) consequences their parents' sexual orientation might have for them. Andrew, for example, acknowledged that he tended to be very concerned about his sexual performance.

Shame despite parental pride. Five individuals (3 women, 2 men) who had been told in childhood noted that they had attempted (and continued to attempt) to maintain a high level of secrecy around their parents' sexual orientation, despite the fact that their parents were quite out about their sexual orientation. Thus, in contrast to some individuals who internalized their parents' sense of pride and activism, these individuals shrank from it. They wished that their parents had not been so out during their childhood, and now that they were adults, they chose who they told. Most had attempted to shield the knowledge about their parents from everyone in childhood and told no one until college or even, in one case, until she was engaged to her partner. They clearly anticipated that other people would react negatively to the fact that their parents were gay and in turn were quite guarded about this information out of a desire to protect their own sense of identity, privacy, and reputation.

Pride and shame. Four women noted that pride and shame "go hand and hand. . . . It's a struggle." Thus, they described their feelings as incredibly dynamic and ever changing. They described ongoing shifts throughout their young adult and adult life with respect to their feelings about their mothers'—and their own—sexual orientation. Three of these women came to identify as lesbians in adulthood. Stated Jenni, a 40-year-old woman:

> She wanted to be open but she couldn't really. . . . It has always made me sad, that she's had to feel like she has to hide who she is. And that secrecy has affected everything about my life. The shame that you inherit, that sort of gets passed down. . . . But no, I don't hide it. It's not like, [the topic of] parents come up and I don't say anything. It's just normal to me.

Why Come Out? Adults' Reasons for Disclosure

Several themes emerged concerning participants' perceived motivations or reasons for disclosing about their families in adulthood—that is, the "why" of disclosure. Some participants disclosed in the context of defending their families and the gay community, some as a means of discriminating possible

friends and allies from potential antagonists, others out of a strong need to be honest and open, and still others as a defensive strike against possible discovery (Table 2).

Education and activism. Eighteen participants (16 women, 2 men) emphasized that their openness about their families in part came out of the fact that they felt a sense of duty or obligation to educate others about their families. Similar to the children in Tasker and Golombok's (1997) study, these adults viewed their parents' sexual orientation as a political issue. They emphasized that they felt an obligation to speak up about matters that involved same-sex marriage and gay parenting and to confront homophobic comments made by people they knew and people they did not know. In doing so, they often disclosed about their own family structure. Indeed, being a child of an LGB parent was a core aspect of their identity. In speaking up about their families, these individuals defined and redefined themselves in this way. Stated Shira, a 36-year-old heterosexual woman:

> I'm as out as possible to educate other folks around me about the realities of gay parenting and being a child of a gay parent. Not a lot of us are adults quite yet and we need to be verbal for each other, our parents, and the next generation. No hiding! Even my boss and coworkers all know.

Participants who sought to disclose to educate others grew up in a variety of circumstances. Ten participants had parents who came out to them during their childhood, 4 always knew their parents were gay, and 3 women had parents who had been out to them but were otherwise closeted. These 3 women noted that as adults, they had sought to battle homophobia within their own families (and their partners' families) when they had the opportunity, even though it was often challenging and caused conflict within the family. Stated Mona, a 25-year-old heterosexual woman with a gay father:

> Sometimes I think wow, maybe one of the reasons [me and my boyfriend] are together is because we're so different and because I have a chance to teach [his family] something and they in turn are teaching me to be more vocal about it to people that I have to take a chance with, that aren't going to necessarily accept it all the way.

"I use it as a litmus test." Nine individuals (8 women, 1 man) noted that being out allowed them to gauge whether a person was someone they wanted to get to know better or not. Four grew up knowing their parents

were gay, and 5 found out in childhood. All 9 noted that their parents' sexual orientation was something that had always been out in the open and was not something that they could choose to disclose or not to disclose. Several mentioned that this helped them to determine "who [their] real friends were, pretty quickly." As adults, they possessed control over the choice to tell or not to tell and chose to tell, as they simply could not imagine accepting people into their lives who couldn't accept their families. Sharing information about their families served as a screen, allowing them to read their audience and determine whether they were potential allies. Not surprisingly, all 9 of these individuals also expressed great pride in their families; in turn, they did not want anything to do with anyone who could not accept their parents. They explicitly mentioned their family structure as a means of "weeding people out." Johanna, a 36-year-old woman stated:

> I kind of use it as a test. If someone is very uncomfortable with it then they're out of here. And that goes with even close friends. I just—this is who I am and if you cannot deal with it then I really don't want you in my life. Regardless of who you are and what role you might be playing. I am very open and honest about that. It has cost me relationships because of that.

"I Won't Hide (Anymore)." Four women emphasized that a key motivation for being out about their families was their need to be open and honest, given that their families were relatively closeted when they were children. Similar to Herek's (1996) suggestion that sexual minorities often come out because of a psychological need for authenticity (and a need for relief from hiding), these women emphasized that the secrecy that surrounded their childhood had caused them to be intolerant of dishonesty and to require truthfulness in their adult relationships. Stated Holly, a 38-year-old bisexual woman:

> One thing I learned from my mom's own experience is to never deny who I am or try to be someone else. So for example, I've been open about my own bisexuality with every relationship I've had since then because I'm not going to hide it.

In addition, 2 women noted that their own need to be honest as adults stemmed not from their own parents' secrecy or closeting but from the fact that as children, their own shame and fear of others' reactions had led them to hide their parents' sexual orientation. As adults, they now "owned" their parents' sexual orientation as an aspect of their identity and sought to make up for the time when they struggled with homophobia. Stated Penny, a 29-year-old

heterosexual woman whose mother was relatively active in the gay community when she was a child:

> I realized how damaging it was for me to have to hold, as a young girl, that much secrecy. I felt afraid to tell men I was dating about my family. Because I was afraid they would probably think I'm going to be a lesbian. Or I might, if they marry me, I might be that. There was a lot of fear around that. Now it feels like something that I don't want to keep secret. It's definitely an up front kind of thing. I don't know, maybe it's my way of announcing to the world what I wasn't able to when I was younger.

Of note is that all 6 women grew up in households in which their parents divorced and their mother, typically concurrently, came out as a lesbian. Thus, in contrast to individuals who grew up with gay parents, an experience that appears to have facilitated a strong sense of family identity, these women had to overcome childhood memories of shame and secrecy to develop a sense of pride in adulthood. Their narratives suggest that this pride grew out of both empathy and sorrow, for their parents and for themselves, and positive experiences of disclosing to others in adulthood. They acknowledged that although such closeting served a protective function in childhood, they should not have had to hide—not then, and not now.

Preemptive disclosure. Six individuals (4 women, 2 men) noted that they only disclosed about their families when they absolutely had to—that is, in situations in which they were afraid that someone would find out. All 6 participants also reported some level of shame and fear about their parents' sexual orientation, both as children and adults. They noted that they generally found information regarding their parents' sexual orientation to be irrelevant and preferred to keep it to themselves unless absolutely necessary. They emphasized that they did not feel that their parents' sexual orientation had anything to do with them and rejected the notion that this was or should be a core aspect of their identity. Stated Sara, a 36-year-old heterosexual woman:

> Basically I just don't disclose unless I think it's going to become an issue and then I figure I better let them know so they're not shocked or whatever.

Lack of disclosure. Finally, 3 adults (1 woman, 2 men) emphasized that they simply did not disclose to people. All of these individuals were individuals who revealed a certain amount of shame and disidentification with their parents' sexual orientation as adults. Said Dan, a 29-year-old heterosexual man:

I don't volunteer the information. It's something that not everybody needs to know. People shouldn't judge me based on my father's decisions, that kind of thing.

Tensions and Contradictions

Although many participants reported relatively rational patterns of disclosure (e.g., "I tell everyone" or "I'm pretty closed in about it"), their narratives revealed numerous contradictions. Certain situations provoked some closeted participants to come out, whereas some supposedly out participants clammed up in certain contexts. The narratives of 3 men and 8 women highlighted such discrepancies.

Pushed to disclose. Four individuals who tended to be very private about their family structure reported one or more instances where they were prompted to disclose in the wake of particularly unacceptable remarks. Said Evan, a 25-year-old heterosexual man who admitted discomfort with his father's sexual orientation:

> One of my friends, right after the election . . . . I asked him if he voted on the issue of gay marriage. He said he did, that he voted for the constitutional amendment, the ban on gay marriage. And I said, I wanted to know a little bit why. He said he didn't think that gay people should have kids. So obviously I had to uh . . . . He was like, "Are you serious?" I was like "Yeah." He's like, "I'm sorry." He did a 180.

In this situation, Evan disclosed about his father, in spite of earlier statements that he did not like to talk about his father's sexual orientation unless there was an immediate risk of being found out. Why? He indicated that he felt he "had to" come out. This suggests that on a private, internal level, Evan acknowledges and identifies himself as an adult son of a gay father, even though on a public level, he does not wish to be identified as such.

Homophobia in partners' families. Four participants noted that although they were generally very open about their parents' sexual orientation, they had not come out about their families to their partners' families because of indications of religious and political conservatism and clear homophobia. This caused them significant distress, as they preferred to be out about their families. Stated Suzie, a 30-year-old heterosexual woman:

> For the first time in my adult life, I am in a relationship with someone whose family has been reported to me to be fairly homophobic. I've gone back and forth in the last year [about telling them.] I got really upset and concerned

and was going to ask [my partner] to kind of prep them, and tell them ahead of time, so I wouldn't be at dinner and be who I am, and drop some bomb. But then, I wanted to give them the benefit of the doubt. . . . But when his dad asked me about my parents and I said they were divorced when I was 3—he didn't have a very positive reaction to *that*! And so right at that moment I chose not to disclose right then. So I just feel—I feel really unsafe. I want honest, open, meaningful relationships with his family, and I can't even do that. I mean, it is foreign for me to be so closed.

Such forced closeting tended to cause conflict between participants and their partners. Partners tried to gauge the right time to tell and also tried to prepare their families for the big news. Participants tended to feel frustrated about being forced to hide aspects of their identity and wished simply to be honest and risk a negative reaction. Those who did tell their partners' families (e.g., in the context of an impending marriage) reported mixed results. Most reported relief, and in most cases the partners' families adjusted (sometimes quite easily) to the news, but in a few cases, the families reacted very poorly, which led to increased conflict.

Sometimes silent. Finally, three individuals who described themselves as being very open about their families contradicted themselves, seemingly unknowingly, during the interview. Catherine, aged 25, who expressed that she was "completely out. . . . I won't stand for anyone homophobic," later noted that she tended to look for signs that individuals were liberal before telling them about her gay father. Jeff, aged 35, noted that he was relatively open about his father's sexual orientation; however, he reported a situation in which his coworker had found information on the Internet associating him with a group for adult children of LGB parents, when he panicked and denied his association. Finally, Noreen, aged 27, noted that she was "completely out" but revealed that she had never introduced her father to her boyfriends. Of note is that all three participants had gay fathers. Although they all expressed pride in their parents, it is possible that their awareness of the stigma around gay men parenting, specifically, kept them from fully acknowledging their parents, despite assertions that they were "extremely out." This appears to reflect individuals' preference to maintain a coherent sense of self and to minimize conflicts and discrepancies in their sense of identity.

Discussion

The current qualitative investigation explored disclosure practices among adults with gay parents through the lenses of life course theory,

symbolic interactionism, and queer theory. Several intriguing findings emerged.

First, the diversity within this group with regard to their individual trajectories is most striking. Discovery that one's parent is gay in childhood was met with a range of reactions, which often changed across one's life course (Bengston & Allen, 1993). Interestingly, the majority of individuals whose parents explicitly denied their sexual orientation noted that they refused to internalize their parents' shame as children. In contrast, some individuals reported feelings of shame in response to their parents' sexual orientation, despite their parents' pride and outness in the community. This parallels Tasker and Golombok's (1997) finding that adolescents felt more proud of their families when their lesbian mothers used discretion in disclosing their sexual orientation. As adults, of course, children of LGB parents enjoy greater control about their family structure and ultimately possess the choice about whether to disclose. Within this developmental context, a number of social influences may influence disclosure. In particular, individuals' interpretations of their immediate context (e.g., the presence of homophobia) appear to play a role in disclosure (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). The data suggest that if the pressures to conform to heteronormative standards are great (and the perceived consequences of disclosure are considerable), individuals may not disclose. The data also suggest, however, that some individuals seek to avoid the pressures of heteronormativity by choosing social networks where disclosure will not be an issue.

However, many participants disclosed even when their audience was potentially unsupportive: Specifically, they did so in the context of educating others (Cain, 1991a, 1991b), out of a need for authenticity (Herek, 1996), or as a means of identifying potential allies. Such reasons suggest that for these individuals, having an LGB parent is a salient aspect of their identity. In some sense defined by their experiences growing up in a LGB parent families, these individuals engaged in queering processes (challenging others' ideas about family and sexuality through disclosure) as a means of creating social change and also as a means of building community (Oswald et al., 2005). The use of disclosure as a litmus test, in particular, represents a social control strategy (Bozett, 1987): For these individuals, their family structure represents a source of "endangered" pride, such that they feel driven to protect themselves from individuals who degrade their families. Some participants engaged in queering processes despite their parents' internalized homophobia: In naming their family structure, these individuals defy society and their parents. Research is needed to understand how and why these individuals come to challenge heteronormativity. In the

absence of parental models, how do they develop the strength needed to be out in the world?

In contrast, some individuals reported that they tended to disclose preemptively or not at all. From their perspective, their parents' sexual orientation is not something that they wish to publicly acknowledge and/or something that they have fully internalized as an aspect of their identity. Of course, some individuals in the sample who stated that they did not tend to disclose in fact did so when their families were indirectly or directly attacked or challenged. This highlights the important distinction between private versus public identities and the fact that we have multiple selves; the "private self" and "public self" are not always in harmony (Goffman, 1956, 1959). Similarly, some individuals who described themselves as very open about their families did not come out in certain situations or contexts, nor did they always acknowledge these discrepancies. These individuals are motivated to maintain a coherent sense of self. Among those who tend not to disclose but occasionally do, acknowledgment of such an inconsistency challenges their projected identity of an individual whose parents' sexual orientation is "not relevant." Among individuals who describe themselves as open about their families, incidents in which they are silent are, perhaps, a disturbing reminder of their own desire to avoid conflict and/or rejection in certain situations. Such intrapersonal discrepancies highlight the inevitable conflict that adult children of LGB parents face: the challenge of negotiating the pressures of heteronormativity (and a desire to protect oneself from marginalization and derision) with one's lived experience in a particular (often invisible, often marginalized) family structure.

As a whole, these findings highlight the utility of viewing the coming-out process as an ongoing process, characterized by change and contradiction (Dindia, 1998). The individuals in this study did not describe a gradual process of coming to terms with, and then coming out about, their families. For approximately one fifth of them, early family pride was replaced by shame as they grew up and confronted negative feedback about their family structure (Litovich & Langhout, 2004). Later, positive experiences reaffirmed their pride, allowed them to reclaim their original construction of what it meant to have a gay parent, and promoted integration or reintegration of their parents' sexual orientation as part of their identity, which facilitated greater self-disclosure. Of course, the coming-out process clearly differs for children of LGB parents and LGB people themselves in some important ways. Adult children of LGB parents are not "identifiable," in most cases, by those with whom they have relationships: The majority identify as heterosexual. Thus, they are less "visible" in some ways than their parents. Furthermore, some adult children may not feel that having a gay parent is an important part of

their identity. But an important way in which these two groups are bound together is that both are regularly faced with the decision to conceal or disclose in social interactions, albeit less so for children of LGB parents. There are "choice points" for disclosure and nondisclosure, and both groups must continually negotiate whether they will speak out or stay silent.

It is important to comment on the fact that the majority of participants in the current study were women. The fact that fewer sons of gay parents volunteered to participate in the current study may be understood in the context of an observation made by one participant, Brian, that "it is more acceptable to be a girl with a gay parent than a guy." Brian, and another male participant, noted that having a gay parent (particularly a gay father) "calls into question a guy's masculinity." Thus, men are less likely to belong to an organization that identifies them as the son of a gay parent. They are even less likely to volunteer for a study explicitly targeted at adults with gay parents. Indeed, research suggests that men are more likely to be homophobic (Herek, 2002).

Also of note is that the majority of participants had lesbian mothers. This may be understood in the context of research that suggests that women are more likely to experience shifts in their sexuality compared to men, and many do not come out until midlife (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995) and are in turn more likely to already have children from heterosexual marriages. Furthermore, women who have always identified as lesbians have an easier time becoming parents than gay men (particularly two or three decades ago, when most of the participants were conceived) given that they can acquire sperm and become parents, whereas gay men typically must adopt.

Implications for Practitioners

This study has a number of implications for practitioners. Of special note is that adults whose parents treated their sexuality as a family secret felt that lack of communication left them vulnerable as children. In contrast, participants who grew up with gay parents typically noted that their parents' honesty about their sexuality was instrumental in preparing them to deal with heterosexism in their schools and communities. Such findings point to the potential utility of facilitating open communication within the family about parental sexual orientation.

Some individuals in the sample reported relatively strong feelings of shame and fear surrounding their parents' sexual orientation that continued over time; these individuals tended to engage mainly in preemptive disclosure or nondisclosure (Bozett, 1987). Of note is that sexual minorities who are out to relevant persons in their lives experience less stress, higher self-esteem, and greater life satisfaction compared to closeted individuals (e.g., Falk,

1994; Jordan & Deluty, 1998). Although one's parent's sexual orientation may be a less salient factor in one's identity than one's own sexual orientation, to deny its existence may have harmful consequences. Individuals who disidentify from their parents' sexual orientation may continue to feel as though they are keeping a secret and to experience feelings of fear and shame, which may manifest as anxiety and depression. Thus, children of LGB parents may benefit from trusting therapeutic relationships in which they are permitted to explore complex feelings about their parents' sexual orientation.

Just as adult children of LGB parents may struggle with disclosure about their families to friends and colleagues, they may also be cautious in disclosing to therapists and educators. For this reason, it is imperative that professionals avoid making assumptions about family structure and/or implying that certain family forms are more legitimate than others. Given the diversity in family forms and the relative invisibility of adult children of LGB parents, it is essential that professionals who work with children and families communicate acceptance of family diversity.

Implications for Policy

Participants who grew up knowing that their parent or parents were gay regarded their parents' sexual orientation (and their families) as normal—it was simply "no big deal." Greater variability was present in the reactions of children who found out about their parents' sexual orientation later in childhood. Although the current sample is small and nonrepresentative, it is worth highlighting that these findings run contrary to concerns that children raised with LGB parents from birth will be confused and will reject their families. These data buttress arguments that there is no reason to assume that sexual minorities are any less fit to be parents than heterosexual men and women.

Of note is that in the current study, feelings of shame surrounding one's parent's sexual orientation were often spoke about in the context of societal homophobia, and a number of participants specifically sought out liberal, accepting communities to avoid feeling shamed about their families. These findings point to the potential for nondiscriminatory policies and judicial rulings pertaining to gay family issues to positively affect individual families and children via their influence on community attitudes about sexual orientation and family diversity.

Implications for Research

An important distinction that emerged in the current sample is between those adults who were raised by gay parents from birth and those that found

out in childhood or adolescence. Given the exploratory nature of this study and the number of participants, comparison of these two groups was not possible. Future research should explore how and to what extent the developmental trajectories, pathways of disclosure, and life experiences of these two groups are similar or different. A second distinction that deserves future study is between those participants who identified as heterosexual and those who identified as nonheterosexual. Only a few participants in the current study identified as nonheterosexual, precluding meaningful comparison or exploration. Future research on these individuals is essential, as there may be ways in which having a gay parent eases one's own coming-out processes; alternatively, these individuals may also feel doubly marginalized and may experience greater pressure to identify as heterosexual.

Another important finding of interest that emerged concerns the relationships that adults raised by LGB parents develop with their partners' families or (future) in-laws. As families come together, adults with LGB parents must make difficult decisions about the "hows" and "whens" of disclosure, an issue that can cause conflict. Of interest is how family relationships unfold in the wake of disclosure and how couples manage the tension that comes with family disapproval.

Limitations and Conclusions

The current study has several clear limitations. First, the sample was relatively homogeneous, lacking racial or ethnic diversity, although education levels of participants varied greatly. There is no doubt that race is an important context that has implications for the experiences of individuals growing up with gay parents. Racial and ethnic minority lesbians and gay men must approach parenting in the context of racism, sexism, and the homophobic attitudes and biases of both heterosexual and homosexual communities (Greene, 1990). In turn, parents face the task of teaching their children to develop a sense of pride in both their race/ethnicity and their unique family structure, in spite of societal racism and homophobia within family, community, and societal contexts. How children receive and negotiate such lessons, and how they navigate membership within and identification with their racial/ethnic community (and their identification as a child of gay parents) are issues that have not been investigated.

The current study was limited by its reliance on a volunteer sample. The study was clearly biased toward adults who identified themselves as adult children of LGB parents in that approximately 70% of the sample was recruited through organizations targeted at this group. Individuals who completely

disidentify with having LGB parents are not represented in this sample. Such a population is difficult to access given that these individuals are unlikely to acknowledge their parents' sexual orientation. However, some inroads have been made in obtaining more representative data from children of LGB parents. Large-scale studies such as the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health include questions about parents' same-sex and different-sex partners (Wainright et al., 2004). By framing questions in a nonthreatening way (e.g., "Has your mother had relationships with men, women, or both?") in the context of larger studies, investigators can acquire more nationally representative data from individuals about their parents' same-sex relationships and identities and their own related attitudes and behaviors.

Finally, as stated, fewer men participated in the current study than women, and fewer participants had gay fathers than lesbian mothers. The voices of adult men who have been raised by gay parents and the voices of both men and women who were raised by gay fathers, specifically, need to be heard. Future research should specifically target these two groups.

Given these limitations, these results should not be viewed as representative. However, the current study makes several important contributions. First, it is the first investigation specifically targeted at understanding disclosure practices among adults raised by LGB parents, and it contributes to the small literature on adults raised by gay parents (Saffron, 1998). Second, it advances our understanding of processes that are unique to individuals with LGB parents and highlights the diversity within this group. One's immediate and childhood context (e.g., when they were told, the degree of homophobia present in their family or community) may have implications for level of comfort with and motivation for disclosure. Being raised by two gay parents from birth appears to be related to an enhanced sense of pride in this sample, which in turn was seen by participants as motivating disclosure. The importance of time as a context cannot be overlooked: The adults in this sample live during a time when issues of gay rights and gay parenting are frequently discussed and debated in the media and attitudes about gay rights are increasingly tolerant. Although the age of participants did not appear to influence their level of shame or pride and/or degree of disclosure, older participants may currently be more out than they were 10 years ago, reflecting a cohort effect. The dynamic nature of disclosure practices and the role of social and political changes in shaping such practices are worthy of further exploration. As the current social and political climate continues to shift, adults who were raised by LGB parents will likely experience increased motivation and/or pressure to speak out about their families. By pushing us to recognize the diversity inherent within families and making visible that which has long been rendered

invisible, they remind us of the socially constructed nature of family. In this way, their voices can help us to rethink and advance our theories of family— but only if we are listening.

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