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**DEVELOPING AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE EXPERIENCES OF PARENTS
WHOSE CHILD HAS COME OUT OF THE CLOSET**

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Developing an Understanding of the Experiences of
Parents Whose Child Has Come Out of the Closet.

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Abstract

This research study was completed to develop a better understanding of the experiences that parents with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people have. A qualitative research study was conducted because of the lack of research and literature about parents who have LGBT children. Data was collected through face-to-face interviews with parents from rural areas and a small city. This paper will provide a literature review about parents with LGBT children. It will also address the themes identified including the initial reactions, the coming out process for parents, awareness and support, dealing with societal attitudes, religion, strengths and benefits of having an LGBT child.

Keywords: Parents, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered Children, and Families

Developing an Understanding of the Experiences of Parents Whose Child Has Come Out of the Closet

Increasing numbers of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) people are coming out of the closet. Parents whose children come out as LGBT have a wide range of reactions. This study explored the various experiences of parents after their children came out of the closet. Parents have a coming out process that incorporates their own emotions, support, religion, and societal attitudes towards their children. These experiences are unique and important for social workers to understand to improve the helping process with families. This paper will provide a review of the literature, an overview of the findings, and a discussion of the findings.

Literature Review

There are approximately nine million gays and lesbians in the United States; 3.5% of adults identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual and .3% as transgendered (Gates, 2011). The Alfred Kinsey Study, completed in 1948, estimated that 10% of the world's population was gay (Gebhard & Johnson, 1979/1998). However, these numbers are likely to be inaccurate because of people remaining in the closet. No matter what the exact number, more people are openly coming out as LGBT and they are coming out at younger ages (Saltzburg, 2004). As a result, progressively more parents are aware that they have an LGBT child and these experiences in dealing with these are important to study.

Societal Attitudes

For centuries, LGBT people have experienced discrimination and oppression and are “considered members of an oppressed group because of the societal stigmatization, discrimination and disenfranchisement they experience” (Newman, 1982, p. 202). Heterosexism and homophobia are prevalent in the social institutions that dominate our society, including schools, governmental agencies, religion, and the media (Eguchi, 2006). Herek (2004) defined heterosexism as

The systems that provide the rationale and operating instructions for... antipathy
[toward that which is not heterosexual]. These systems include beliefs about

gender, morality, and danger by which homosexuality and sexual minorities are defined as deviant, sinful, and threatening. Hostility, discrimination, and violence are thereby justified as appropriate and even necessary. Heterosexism prescribes that sexual stigma be enacted in a variety of ways, most notably through enforced invisibility of sexual minorities and, when they become visible, through overt hostility. (p. 15)

Heterosexism supports the status quo and societal's rigid gender roles. According to heterosexism, those relationships that do not fall into the heterosexual norms are considered wrong and unacceptable. LGBT persons have been denied equal rights including not being able to marry and not being able to receive employment benefits to same-sex couples. LGBT persons who experience domestic abuse are at an increased risk of not being protected or taken seriously (Mapes, 2009; Eguchi, 2006). Heterosexism persists through all levels of society, and exists in all classes, genders, races, age groups and professions.

Heterosexism influence parents by dictating that the heterosexual child is the normal and desirable and that having an LGBT child is not (Huegel, 2003). Upon finding out that their child is LGBT, parents feel guilty and view their child negatively based on societal stereotypes (Woog, 1997; Kimmel & Garnets, 1993).

Parental Reactions

Society's discrimination and rejection of LGBT people spills over onto parents, who often react negatively to their child's disclosure of their sexual orientation. Parental reactions of discovering their child was LGBT vary and are distinctive to each parent (Woog, 1997). "Some parents spend a lifetime hobbling just a few steps; others race along, gaining momentum as they go. All are united, however, by the fact that one day their lives are irrevocably changed when the child they thought they knew says, "Mom, Dad...I'm gay" (Woog, 1997, p. 25).

Upon hearing they have an LGBT child, some research suggests that parents follow a developmental grieving model, such as Kubler-Ross' stages of grief, including shock, denial, anger, bargaining, acceptance, and denial (Savin-Williams & Dube', 1998; Anderson, 1997; Bernstein, 1990; Borhek, 1993; Bozett & Sussman, 1989, De Vine, 1984; Martin, 1982; Myers, 1982; Pearlman, 1992; Robinson, Walters, & Steen, 1989; Strommen, 1989; Tremble, Schneider & Appathurai, 1989; Wirth, 1978). Parents move through these stages grieving the news that their child is LGBT. Part of the grieving experiences for parents is the loss of the "heterosexual dream" that they had for their children (Savin-Williams & Dube', 1998; Mahoney, 1994).

In a review of the literature, Savin-Williams and Dube' (1998) found that parental reactions did not always follow the developmental grieving models when parents had children who behaved outside of typical gender roles; although they may experience some of the same feelings. For example, parents who had boys who played with dolls or girls who are interested in mechanics had different reactions than those parents whose children followed more rigid gender roles. Parental reactions ranged from "disbelief, negative comments," to "believing it was a phase" to complete "rejection." Outright rejection was the exception and not the rule (Savin-Williams & Dube', 1998, p. 9; Savin-Williams, 1995). Shock and guilt feelings were reactions commonly experienced by parents (Savin-Williams & Dube', 1998).

Other feelings that parents experience is self-blame because of they believe genetics or home situations are why they have an LGBT child (Woog, 1997). Parents may themselves go into the closet as a result of societal stigmas (Phillips & Ancis, 2008, p. 134). There were different also reactions between mothers and fathers (Savin-Williams & Dube', 1998; Ben-Ari, 1995; Robinson, Walters, & Skeen, 1989).

Parents also accept their child as LGBT, although this is a process which may last three to five years (Woog, 1997, p. 28). Parental knowledge about the LGBT population and knowing someone who is gay impacts the child's coming out process and parental acceptance (Morrow, 2000; Muller, 87;

Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998; Saltzburg, 2004). More longitudinal research is needed to develop a better understanding about parents' reactions (Savin-Williams & Dube', 1998).

The coming out process for LGBT people is affected by parents' potential reactions. As a result, many LGBT individuals opt to come out of the closet upon leaving home (Woog, 1997)

Impact of Religion

According to the American Religious Identification Survey in 2001, 81% of adults identify with a specific religion and 76.5% as Christians (Robinson, 2011). Organized religion frequently plays a role in the overall attitudes about LGBT people in society. For example, gay marriage has been opposed by Christians and has been identified as an immoral (Olson, Cadge, & Harrison, 2006). These views may be adopted by parents and then applied to their own children.

Parents connected to organized religion and its' beliefs, repeatedly struggle if their child is not heterosexual. Parents can be conflicted because religion portrays homosexuality as a moral sin (Savin-Williams, 2001). Some Christians encourage use of reparative therapy which is based on fixing the LGBT person from being gay to heterosexual (Bernstein, 2003). These rigid beliefs about what it means to be LGBT, often forces parents to make a choice between acceptance and/or rejection of their child. This conflict includes worrying about if their child will end up in hell (Griffin, Wirth, & Wirth, 1990).

Study Design

Qualitative research methods were used in this study. Because of the nature of this study, including identifying oneself as a parent of an LGBT person, a snowball sample was used. The researcher had contact with some parents of LGBT children who in turn provided names of additional parents to use in this study. Twelve parents of LGBT children identified and volunteered in this study. Parents participated in face-to face interviews. Interview questions were used as a guide for the interviews. Interview narratives were transcribed and coded and provided rich themes to analyze. This study explored parents who have LGBT children and their experiences during and after the coming out

process.

Participants

All of the participants in this study have at least one child who identifies as LGBT. The parents in this study were all white and ranged in ages from 50 to 70. Two of the participants were men and ten were women. The parents were middle class; three were from rural communities, and nine from a small city. Ten of the parents in this study were or had been in the past been involved with a support group for parents of LGBT children.

Data Collection and Analysis

An interview guide was used to obtain data. The questions provided parents the opportunity to reflect on their experiences when their child came out and their experiences after having a child who openly identified as LGBT. Confidentiality was considered in the process of identifying participants for the study and was reviewed with parents before each interview. In-depth interviews were conducted and lasted from 45 minutes to two hours. The interview narratives were transcribed and through the use of coding.

Results

Several common themes emerged during the data analysis. Common themes included initial reactions and the coming out process for parents. Awareness and support, dealing with societal attitudes, religion, strengths and benefits of having an LGBT child were other themes identified that lead to a better understanding of parents' experiences.

Initial reactions

I would have liked someone to tell me that they understood my mourning and grief because my son was not what I thought he was. (Parent 4)

He was 24 or 25 when he came out. And I am just thinking he had this secret all these years and when I first asked him...when do you think you really knew you were gay? And he said I knew from a little boy, I knew I was different. I feel bad that that poor kid was alone with this secret all by himself. Struggling, probably wondering what's wrong with him or why he was different. (Parent 4)

She told me she was gay and I remember my heart just dying.. It was harder on my husband. He would say things like I am never going to be able to walk her down the aisle. (Parent 5)

It was a relief. I was glad he said finally said. So we could just move forward. (Parent 3)

I gave her a hug. I told her I loved her. (Parent 12)

For three months I cried, not in front of him, because I felt guilty. Not because he was gay, but I knew he would be treated differently. People will say bad things about gays and you hear the comment 'that's so gay'; I didn't want him to be teased, hurt, or chided. I just know it's more difficult, it's a more difficult life. He would be discriminated, treated differently, questioned differently, made fun of, and gays in the United States are killed. (Parent 7)

He isn't different your perception of who is has changed and he is not who you thought he was. He is different. You just have to change your expectations. He isn't going to marry somebody and have five kids with a picket fence and all that. (Parent 4)

He just had a lot of feminine desires. (Parent 10)

Parents of LGBT go through an emotional roller coaster of feelings, from sadness, grief, relief, and love. Some parent's initial reaction was of sadness knowing that their children may face more struggles in life due to their sexual orientation. Knowing that discrimination and hate existed caused parents to feel sad that their child would likely experience these. Whereas other parents whose children fell outside of normal gender roles did not experience any surprise or shock. These parents also felt relief that their child had verbalized their sexual orientation so that they family could go forward.

Grief was also commonly experienced. Parents were not grieving because their child was gay, but rather their grief focused on the changes in expectations they held for their son or daughter. For example, parents grieved that their child may not be able to marry and follow heterosexual traditions.

One parent indicated feelings of grief over the way she parented not knowing her child was gay. There was sadness that she had not been the parent she could have been had she known her child was gay. This parents felt that her parenting would have been better had she known that truth rather than parenting with heterosexual assumptions.

Parents also responded with love and support when their children came out.

Coming Out for Parents

We told our son that it was up to him to come up with a plan and he still hasn't because it doesn't matter to him. (Parent 1)

There is a risk I know that. There are some of our friends who are probably horrified. I am not going to push her on them. (Parent 3)

I didn't tell any of my friends for a long time, mainly because he asked us not to say anything. He didn't want his brothers to hear from anyone but him but he wasn't ready to tell them. We totally granted him his wish and didn't say anything, and that was maybe a little hard too. Not to be able to talk to your friends. I don't tell the people I work with. Most of them don't know that I have a gay son. (Parent 7)

What's been most difficult is the reaction of my family members. No one on my side of the family knows because our son has chosen not to tell them. He told my husband's family, but not supportively (Parent 8)

In this study, ten of the parents learned that their child was gay as an adult. Two LGBT children revealed their sexual orientation as teenagers. Parents, just like their children, experienced a coming out process. Parents had to decide who to tell, when to tell, and how to tell. Parents had an acute awareness that although they accepted their children, not everyone in the family, their friends or community did. As a result, telling for the parents was a process similar to their child's coming out. If a child was not openly out, parents had to balance their own need to tell with the needs of their children.

The majority of children in this study came out to their mothers. LGBT people felt safer and more comfortable coming out to their mothers rather than their father.

Societal Attitudes

I mean I want my children to be able to get married if they want to. You know if the church wants to call it that, that's their business, but my children should have the same right as we had and be able to get the same benefit. I think it's going to happen eventually. So hopefully it will happen for our children. (Parent 9)

There's still so many for whatever reason, angry people out there. Why they're angry, I have no idea, can't figure that one out. I think they just fear what they don't understand and there always has to be a bully for whatever reason, and I don't want my daughter to wind up in the same place that Matthew Sheppard did. That's a very frightful place to be in for any parent. (Parent 12)

Parents are keenly aware of the societal attitudes towards their LGBT children including hate,

heterosexism, and discrimination. Media coverage of violence against LGBT people increases the fear for parents. All parents were concerned that these negative societal attitudes would impact their child's physical and emotional safety.

Discrimination and denial of basic human rights was a worry for parents. Not being able to marry and being denied human and legal rights because of their sexual orientation caused parents concerns and increased their worry for their children.

Awareness and Support

My brother in law came out to his parents he came out to the parents because his partner was diagnosed with AIDS. To see my father in law, World War II vet, pretty tough guy and mother in law, pretty conservative, religious background give immediate acceptance, immediate, I remember my mother and law would say he's our flesh and blood, he's our son, we're not going to worry about this. The whole family was like that. My brother in law's partner died a year later. And at the memorial service, in front of the church I saw a note that he had written to my brother in law about their love for each other, about the joy of sharing their life and I had one of these duh moments, one of these epiphanies where it's like oh, their relationship is just my wife's and mine. (Parent 11)

My parents found out, my brother was gay when they were older and they just totally accepted him, so it wasn't difficult for us. (Parent 7)

PFLAG offers a support system and I think a lot of families who are struggling with their children feel like they are the only people this is ever happening to. Get involved in a PFLAG organization and find out that you're not alone. (Parent 12)

About 50% of the parents interviewed had prior knowledge about the LGBT community including have LGBT family and friends. The majority of participants actively sought out support from family, friends, and support groups including Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gay (PFLAG). Support was a common theme in helping parents move through their feelings to acceptance of their LGBT child. Support groups like PFLAG allowed parents to meet other people who had similar experiences. They also provided information and resources to those parents who had limited knowledge about their child's sexual orientation. Support groups provided the parents with connections with others and realize they are not alone. This support was an outlet for parents to deal with their feelings.

Religion

Her faith was important to her, but she just feels so rejected. (Parent 1)

You know my husband's family they see it as a sin that they will pray for him. I do give them credit that they don't treat him any differently, so I applaud them for that. But it has been the most difficult part for me is, you know this is your grandson, he's not any different. He hasn't changed because he's gay. He's still the most loving, caring, generous person and you see him as a sinner who's gonna go to hell. And, you know, I've had to say out loud if it comes down to my relationship with my child I'm going to pick him over them any day of the week. So that's probably been the hardest thing for me. (Parent 8)

I grew up catholic. I had my children in catholic education, and that they don't accept my son as he is, we have left. We can't support that. It made us look at what we were doing, when he wanted to stop going to church, he was like 'mom, they don't believe in me, how can I believe in them?', and I'm like 'oh my god' That impacted me and hit me very hard and it was from then on that I didn't feel comfortable, and so we have found another church, and we love it. They really mean what they say when they say 'everyone is welcome here.' So we're very happy there. (Parent 10)

I am a Christian who began to study the Bible and Jesus' teachings that taught what we need to get out of judgment and condemnation into love and acceptance. (Parent 11)

The majorities of the parents interviewed are still or had been practicing Christians at one point in their life. All parents found that the Christian religion had a negative impact on their child because of the belief that being gay is wrong. Many children, although not all, abandoned their faith while others sought out LGBT supportive religious environments.

Religion and Christianity also had a positive impact on parents. Parents attribute religion and their faith with helping them accept their LGBT children by teaching them the importance of love, faith, and family.

Half of the parents in this study maintained active membership in their Christian church and remain openly supportive of the LGBT people. They believe that the church needs to change to include and accept LGBT people. They maintain that the Christian faith has not adapted to the needs of society and their membership. These parents stay in their churches to advocate for internal change because of their commitment to their children.

Others parents have opted to attend LGBT supportive churches, while others do not participate in organized religion.

Strengths and Benefits

Never in my wildest dreams did I think anyone in our country was gay and not in my wildest dreams, my son. But I think it is a blessing. The best thing that ever happened. (Parent 4)

It takes awhile sometimes for parents whose kids have newly come out and to realize that there are tons of people out there. And they will find if they can open themselves up that they will make some of the best friendships of their lives. (Parent 2)

Our daughter especially has opened my eyes to a lot of thinking about life in different terms and different ways and I think that's really positive, being able to learn from her. I wouldn't have it have it any other way. I'm just thrilled. I feel like it's a privilege and a pleasure that I would never have anticipated when we had our children. (Parent 9)

I'm a better person because of him....I'm a lot less judgmental; I'm more accepting. (Parent 10)

In society, having an LGBT son or daughter is often viewed as negative. Parents feel bad that their child is gay and they experience grief. However, parents in this research, found strength and empowerment in having a child who was out. Parents experienced growth and change in a positive fashion. They were challenged to be better and more genuine people. Having an LGBT child encouraged parents to view the world through a more inclusive lens.

They were also forced to look outside their comfort zone for support and as a result, developed unique and lifelong relationships. They were connected to people whom they would not have met had their child not been LGBT. Support groups also provided ways to increase relationships and bonds with people in the LGBT community

Because of discrimination and societal attitudes, over time, many parents began advocating for their children on the local, state, and federal level. They became empowered to help their children and others. This was a common feeling amongst parents.

Discussion

As more LGBT are coming out of the closet, it is important to develop a better understanding of

the experiences of their parents. This study not only provides additional information on the experiences of parents of LGBT but also builds on the current literature.

When a child comes out of the closet, parents are forever changed. Parents go through a wide range of emotions from sadness, grief, love, and acceptance. Parents were sad that their child would be more susceptible to societal discrimination and a life which would be more difficult. Some parents experienced sadness and grief over the loss of their heterosexual expectations that they had for their children. This finding was similar to many studies that determined that parental reactions vary and that parents grieve the loss of the heterosexual dreams (Savin-Williams & Dube', 1998; Anderson, 1997; Mahoney, 1994; Bernstein, 1990; Borhek, 1993; Bozett & Sussman, 1989, De Vine, 1984; Martin, 1982; Myers, 1982; Pearlman, 1992; Robinson, Walters, & Steen, 1989; Strommen, 1989; Tremble, Schneider & Appathurai, 1989; Wirth, 1978). Although parents had a wide range of emotions, denial and anger were not experienced as often. This research found that that parents do not always move through the developmental stages of grief as previous literature established (Savin-Williams & Dube', 1998; Anderson, 1997; Bernstein, 1990; Borhek, 1993; Bozett & Sussman, 1989, De Vine, 1984; Martin, 1982; Myers, 1982; Pearlman, 1992; Robinson, Walters, & Steen, 1989; Strommen, 1989; Tremble, Schneider & Appathurai, 1989; Wirth, 1978). Parents experience their feelings based on religion, support, and prior knowledge,

Parents whose children fell outside of the traditional gender roles were more likely to experience feelings of relief. Suspecting their child could be gay helped parents move through the adjustment and acceptance process more quickly. Savin-Williams and Dube' (1998) found that having children who don't fit the norm assisted parents with being more equipped to having an LGBT child.

Parents, just like their children, experienced a coming out. Parents had to decide to who to tell and when and balance this with how openly out their child was. Living partially in the closet as a family increased the day to day reality and struggle for parents because some people knew and others did not. The finding that a family has to come out as well, upon a child disclosing their LGBT identity

is supported by past research, which shows that upon disclosure, parents deal with the stigma of being the parent of a gay, lesbian, or bisexual child, causing some parents to be in the closet themselves about their child's sexual orientation, feeling concern about what others will think (Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998; OutProud, 2008). Essentially the child's coming out becomes the parents coming out, creating a new lens through which the parents view the world (Saltzburg, 2004).

Upon disclosure, parents had concerns about how their child would be treated as a result of societal attitudes. Parents were afraid that their child's safety was at risk because of the discrimination and hatred against LGBT people in society. Parents felt frustration that their child would be denied equal rights.

Religion, in this study, impacted parents differently. Some parents opted to leave organized religion because the way homosexuality is viewed. Other parents sought out supportive churches whereas some parents stayed in their churches to try to bring about change. Parents attributed religion with teaching them how to love and accept others. All parents believed that organized religion needed to support LGBT people. Organized religion, including Christianity, is often seen as an obstacle to parental acceptance even when this is not their experience. The literature supports that traditional religious beliefs, including where being LGBT is immoral and sinful, can impact a parent's willingness to support their LGBT child (Savin-Williams, 2001).

Having support from family, friends, and/or support groups assisted parents with developing an understanding of their LGBT children. Robinson, Walters, and Skeen (1989) found that two-thirds of parents active in support groups had reached acceptance of their children's gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities (as cited in Fields, 2001). Support groups offered parents accurate information, an outlet to talk about their feelings, and provided parents with a realization that they were not alone (Phillips & Ancis, 2008; Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998). Knowing someone who was LGBT before their child came allowed parents to see that LGBT people lead normal everyday lives and therefore, acceptance was easier.

This research found that having an LGBT child was a strength and helped parents become better people. Parents changed and became more accepting of others because of how their LGBT child challenged their traditional beliefs. Over time, parents were also empowered to become involved in advocacy to help increase the likelihood their children have equal rights.

Limitations

The small sample size was a limitation in this study because the parents in this study may not be representative of all parents. The lack of diversity, including race, religion, and socioeconomic status, was also a limitation.

Implications for Social Work Practice

It is important that social workers develop a clear understanding of the parental experiences when a child comes out of the closet. Initial parental reactions can have a long lasting impact on the parent child relationship (Muller, 1987). Social workers can assist parents with this process so that the coming out is less traumatic. Social workers should provide resources and support to parents to assist them with the acceptance process.

It continues to be important for social workers need to understand the families that they are working with, including families with LGBT children. In order to provide ethical and quality services, social workers need to identify and address their own biases towards LGBT people. Social workers who practice who are homophobic and hetero-sexist are at risk for providing harmful information to parents with LGBT children and practicing unethically.

Social workers should continue to provide education about LGBT issues including challenging parents to review the traditional gender roles and heterosexual expectations that they have for their children. Providing accurate education and challenging parents perspectives and expectations for their children in general will allow LGBT children to be more comfortable with coming out and will encourage parents to understand that their child's sexual orientation no matter what it is normal.

If I were a social worker I would say the same things I said here. That unconditional

love. And that medical science is now telling us that this is not a choice. This is just the way it is going to be. Support your child and watch for signs of depression. These kids....you don't have to tell me this ...but a lot of times there is a child who really needs help and they are at risk for drugs and suicide or depression or whatever. These social workers and psychologists from schools are seeing that. There has already been some what I call..some damage done to this child's psyche by the time the social workers gets the ball. So now they are really working hard to support this kid. And this child needs to know that they are OK.
(Parent 6)

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