RURAL LESBIANS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPACT OF COMING OUT WITHIN THEIR FAMILIES: A QUALITATIVE INVESTIAGTION

By Jennifer Lee Ann Glass

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of Radford University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Psychology in the Department of Psychology

Dissertation Advisor: Dr. Sarah L. Hastings
April 2015

Dr. Sarah Hastings
Dissertation Advisor

4-28-15
Date

Dr. Tracy Cohn
Committee Member

4.28.15
Date

Dr. Thomas Pierce
Committee Member

4/28/15
Date

Abstract

Disclosure of sexual orientation often changes several aspects within the family system, as relationship dynamics, roles, expectations, and boundaries may shift. Previous research has mainly examined the perspectives of urban and metropolitan dwelling family members when they learn someone is gay or lesbian and neglected the unique experiences of rural individuals. This study explored changes that occurred within a family system after disclosure of sexual identity, specifically for rural and nonmetropolitan lesbians. Through 11 semi-structured interviews and grounded theory analysis, 17 themes emerged, which were categorized into 4 over-arching groups: Family Processes, Family Communication, Community, and Intrapersonal Struggles. The sub-categories were combined to create the substantive code, *Dynamic Interactions on Long-Term Sexual Orientation Disclosure in a Conflicted Environment,* which represents the core story of how rural lesbians manage family relationships over time after sexual orientation disclosure.

Key words: lesbian, coming out, family dynamics, family relationships, rural

Table of Contents

Abstract ii

Table of Contents iii

Chapter I: Summary of the Issues 1

Introduction 1

Operational Definition 1

Lesbian Identity Development 2

Coming Out 3

Family Relationships and Coming Out 4

Rural Sexual Minorities 8

Rural Lesbians and Family Relationships 10

Areas for Future Research 13

Qualitative Approach 14

Participants 15

Instruments 16

Researcher-as-the-Instrument 17

Analyses 17

Initial Coding 18

Selective Coding 20

Limitations and Directions for Future Research 24

Summary 26

Chapter II: Literature Review 27

Introduction 27

Operational Definitions 27
Lesbian Identity Development 28
Coming Out 30
Family Relationships and Coming Out 31
Coming Out and the Family's Response 33
Rural Sexual Minorities 36
Rural Lesbians and Family Relationships 40
Conclusions 43
Chapter III: Methodology 45
Design Rationale 45
Participants 46
Instruments 49
Researcher-as-the-Instrument 50
Procedure 51
Analyses 52
Coding 53
Trustworthiness 55
Chapter IV: Results 57
Review of the Research Questions 57
Data Analysis 57
Credibility & Trustworthiness 59
Participant Characteristics 60
Grounded Theory 61

Initial Coding 62
Focused Coding 101
Selective Coding 102
Summary 104
Chapter V: Discussion 105
Summary of Themes 105
Current Findings In Comparison with Existing Literature 107
Limitations and Directions for Future Research 110
Conclusions 111
Tables 113
Table 1. Participant Demographic Information 113
Table 2. Initial Coding Meaning Units 114
Table 3. Focused Codes 115
References 120
Appendix A 126
Appendix B 127
Appendix C 128
Appendix D 129
Appendix E 130
Appendix F 131
Appendix G 132
Appendix H 133

Chapter I: Summary of the Issues

Introduction

The frequency of suicide by lesbian and gay youths has captured national media attention and highlighted the rejection, discrimination, and oppression this population frequently endures (Hilton & Szymanski, 2011), often at the hands of their own families and communities (Green, 2002). Despite the increased focus on lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals, research on sexual minorities is still fairly limited in scope and conducted mostly with metropolitan samples (McCarthy, 2000).

This review will outline issues relevant to rural gays and lesbians, with an emphasis on lesbians' experiences with family relationships. The author will first discuss coming out and family relationships common to all LGB. Then, specific challenges faced by rural LGB will be addressed. The author will detail the intersection of rural lesbians and family relationships, drawing from the existing literature. This discussion will provide evidence that further research is necessary to understanding the unique experiences of rural lesbians. Lastly, the author will describe the current research study, which examined the impact of coming out on family relationships in a rural environment, and subsequent findings.

Operational Definition

Sexual orientation refers to "an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and /or sexual attractions to men, women, or both sexes (APA, 2008; APA, 2011)." Put more simply, it describes those to whom one is sexually and romantically attracted. Previous research has suggested that sexuality and sexual orientation exist along a continuum, ranging from attraction to the opposite sex only to attraction to the same sex only

(Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953). Sexual orientation is generally divided into three categories: (1) heterosexual, or attracted to members of the other sex; (2) gay/lesbian, or attracted to members of the same sex; and (3) bisexual, or attracted to members of both sexes (APA, 2008; APA, 2011).

"Coming out" is a popular term used to describe the act of revealing one's sexual orientation to others, but can also include developing awareness of same-sex attraction and identification with the LGB community (APA, 2008; APA, 2011). The decision to come out warrants consideration of numerous factors, including potential reactions from others and perceptions of one's personal safety (Valentine, Skelton, Butler, 2003). Disclosure practices are complex and most lesbians and gay men do not reveal their sexual orientation to everyone in their lives at the same time (Carnelley, Hepper, Hicks, & Turner, 2011; Green, 2002). Some may choose to remain "in the closet" and keep their sexual orientation private, others may come out to certain individuals, and some may come out to everyone (APA, 2008; APA, 2011).

Lesbian Identity Development

Many different models of gay and lesbian identity development exist, and no model is universal to all sexual minorities; however, all models describe similar stages and events that gays and lesbians experience when developing identity as a sexual minority (Liddle, 2007a). Summarizing the main theories of identity development, Liddle points out that most models describe the beginning stages of lesbian identity development with the assumption of heterosexuality; a young girl believes she will grow up to marry a man. As the girl continues to develop, she realizes that she is different from her peers; for example, she may not be attracted to opposite sex peers or may be uninterested in

marrying. Eventually, the girl will consider that she may be attracted to the same sex, a process that can lead to negative feelings. The young girl may fear rejection from family and friends or violence in the community. Some, but not all, females progress from negative to positive feelings about their sexual orientation and may identify as a lesbian or use another applicable term. All models emphasize the importance of finding like-others for support, to reduce isolation and loneliness, and to connect with positive role models who can help the female develop her own affirmative lesbian identity.

In addition to hearing the stereotypes and myths of homosexuality from society, many LGB must contend with negative messages about their identity from their family of origin. Identity Development Theory posits that family members' reactions and coping also influences the lesbian or gay man's sense of self (Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006). Identity Development Theory asserts that sexual minorities seek validation from significant others and internalize this feedback. Before realizing they are gay, young people are often privy to family members' views on homosexuality, which can influence the LGB persons' beliefs about what it means to be gay (Waldner & Magruder, 1999). Positive and negative reactions and beliefs of family members may be incorporated into the individuals' sense of self (Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006), thus it is unsurprising that family support is imperative to the development of an affirmative identity (Hilton & Szymanski, 2011).

Coming Out

Lesbian and gay youth typically come out to peers first, followed by siblings, mothers, and fathers last (Green, 2002; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). Revealing one's sexual orientation to parents is often difficult (Hilton & Szymanski, 2006) and is

frequently the last step in the coming out process (Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006). Coming out to parents involves consideration of a number of factors, including: (1) the importance of parents as a source of social support, social identity, and economic support (although this may be less relevant for adult offspring); (2) the availability of nonfamily social and economic support; and (3) the individual's perception of the advantages and disadvantages to themselves, the family members, and their relationship (Green, 2002).

Coming out is sometimes a risky decision. However, disclosing sexual orientation can have significant advantages to the individual. Being open about sexual orientation increases the opportunity to seek social support from other gays and lesbians, a crucial component of positive identity formation (D'Augelli & Hart, 1987; Liddle, 2007a) D'Augelli & Hart, 1987). Gays and lesbians with an affirmative identity demonstrate higher self-esteem and better psychological adjustment (APA, 2008; Carnelly, et al., 2011).

Family Relationships and Coming Out

LGB face the possibility of being rejected from their family after coming out, not because of something they have done, but because of their identity (Connolly, 2006; Green, 2002). Unlike ethnic minorities, lesbian and gay individuals do not usually share the same sexual minority status with parents (Connolly, 2006; Green, 2002). In groups that face discrimination, parents are often able to educate and prepare their children to deal with oppression because they share the same vulnerability to prejudice (Green, 2002); furthermore, parents are able to demonstrate means of coping with discrimination (Connolly, 2006). Lesbian and gay youth are at a disadvantage though, because their parents are often unable to prepare them for dealing with prejudice (Green, 2002).

Additionally, in minority families, parents can take on an additional protective role, but parents of lesbian and gay youth often do not experience the same oppressive forces. Rather than becoming allies, parents and children can end up on opposing teams, with parents taking sides against their child, leading to lesbian and gay youth "living with the enemy (Green, 2002)." This predicament leads gays and lesbians to be the only minority in America whose family consistently rejects them (Hilton & Szymanski, 2011).

Disclosure forces family members to reevaluate everything they have understood about homosexuality (Green, 2002; Matthews & Lease, 2000). Parents and siblings reexamine previously held beliefs about gender, sex, sexuality, and religion (Green, 2002; Matthews & Lease, 2000). Family members are often ignorant of issues faced by lesbians and gay men, or believe inaccurate assumptions or stereotypes (Green, 2002), which they apply to the recently out individual (Matthews & Lease, 2000). Gays and lesbians are usually aware of their family's attitude on gender roles, sexual behavior, homosexuality, nonconformity, and religion, long before coming out; thus, fears of parental rejection or abuse often contribute to keeping one's identity secret. Coming out can disrupt the family's homeostasis and equilibrium is quickly restored by rejecting the individual (Matthews & Lease, 2000).

Parental rejection is often spurred on by homophobia, fear of AIDS, lack of accurate information, and little exposure to gays and lesbians (Waldner & Magruder, 1999). Additionally, characteristics commonly associated with negative parental reactions include conservative political ideologies, religiosity, having older parents, being a member of an ethnic minority, lack of education, and authoritarian parenting styles (Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006; Waldner & Magruder, 1999). Negative reactions

from family members lead gays and lesbians to face an increased risk of alienation, depression, suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and substance abuse (Hilton & Szymanski, 2011).

Coming out is a developmental milestone, both for gays and lesbians, as well as their family members (Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006). Like the lesbian or gay individual, family members often move through a similar coming out process (Matthews & Lease, 2000), needing time to adapt, emerge, and understand the disclosure (Connolly, 2006). Even if parents suspected their child is gay, they can still feel caught off-guard by the revelation (Connolly, 2006). On the other hand, parents who did not suspect their child was LGB, may have a harder time adjusting to the disclosure (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008). Parents and siblings may experience feelings of grief and shock (Hilton & Szymanski, 2011). Parents grieve the loss of the child they thought they had and the loss of dreams for their child (Matthews & Lease, 2000). Expectations of a traditional marriage, having children, and carrying on the family legacy are challenged (Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006). Family members may also feel isolated from their community and fear rejection from other family members (Matthews & Lease).

There are a few characteristics that set accepting and rejecting families apart. Cohesion is the overall connectedness within the family system and the emotional bonding that family members have toward one another, while adaptability is the extent to which a family is able to change when confronted with novel situations (Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006). Families with high cohesion, adaptability, and warmth are in a better position to accept the lesbian or gay individual, because rejection is a violation of the rules of a cohesive, adaptable, and warm family (Green, 2002; Willoughby, Malik, &

Lindahl). Family Stress Theory posits that families with strong psychological resources in place prior to disclosure are in a better position to respond to stressful events, while those with little resources may accept negative stereotypes and myths about gays and lesbians (Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl). Despite these factors, parent-child relationships prior to coming out may be the best predictor of parents' reactions and adjustment, because despite the violation of boundaries, roles, and beliefs, secure attachments between parent and child remain (Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl).

Coming out can transform many aspects of the family system (Green, 2002) as families adapt to their new roles (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008). Long-term adjustment varies among families (Heatherington & Lavner), and it is hard to predict the consequences of coming out on family relationships (Green). Families may react negatively at first but become more tolerant and accepting over time. Other families may experience no changes at all (Connolly, 2006; Green). Families that were distant and conflict-avoidant before will likely remain so after; those who were intrusive and critical before the disclosure are not likely to suddenly become more accepting and respectful of boundaries (Green). Disclosure can open communication and intimacy and the family may become stronger, closer, and more honest, whereas fighting families can generate the sort of conflict that destroys the family system completely. Family roles and expectations may shift, as well as the ways in which closeness, distancing, and boundaries are experienced (Connolly); however, the disclosure of sexual orientation will generally be processed through the family's usual means of coping (Green).

Rural Sexual Minorities

The defining characteristics of rural areas have been variably described in the literature (McCarthy, 2000; Schank & Skovholt, 2006). Common factors of the definition often include census bureau standards of numerical population, population density, geography, and distance from urban centers (McCarthy, 2000; Schank & Skovholt). The U.S. Bureau of Census (2010) defines rural in exclusionary terms, declaring rural regions as those which do not meet criteria of an urban area or an urban cluster. Urban areas are those which contain "densely developed territory, and encompass residential, commercial, and other non-residential urban land uses" (U.S. Bureau of Census), with a population of 50,000 people or more. Urban clusters must contain between 2,500 and 50,000 people; therefore, considering the definitions of urban areas/clusters, rural is defined as all population, housing, and territories of a region with 2,500 people or less. In 2010, 19.3% of Americans lived in areas considered rural by the U.S. Census Bureau.

Rural communities are characterized by conservative and traditional values, religious fundamentalism, resistance to change, high visibility, and lacking confidentiality. Additionally, there is often less tolerance for people who violate community norms (Leedy & Connolly, 2007). Rural regions are thought to be autonomous, cohesive, and highly integrated (McCarthy, 2000). Residents are generally satisfied with their community, and enjoy the quality of life, social atmosphere, low crime rates, familiarity with residents, and sense of community (McCarthy).

Integrating new family roles after coming out is not unique to sexual minorities, but these issues are intensified in rural areas (D'Augelli & Hart, 1987), because gays and lesbians face specific challenges their metropolitan counterparts do not, such as extreme

isolation, unsupportive social environments, absent or limited public places to socialize, and little or no organizational and structural supports (McCarthy, 2000). To expound the existing obstacles, lack of economic resources and isolated location may prevent many from even accessing the Internet, a potential source of support and normative information (McCarthy).

Notably, the literature has consistently demonstrated that rural gays and lesbians face specific challenges (Boulden, 2001; D'Augelli & Hart, 1987; McCarthy, 2000). Socialization with other gays and lesbians is often difficult in rural areas for a number of reasons. Gay communities are notoriously invisible and underground in rural areas, due to justifiable fears of safety (Boulden; D'Augelli & Hart; McCarthy). McCarthy, in examining a group of rural lesbians, reflected this notion, revealing that gay communities in rural areas are often maintained secretively, leading to their invisibility. In fact, the participants of this study mentioned that when a lesbian came out in their small town, she was often perceived as the first gay or lesbian person many people had met (McCarthy).

Lack of privacy and anonymity are also well-documented issues with which rural gays and lesbians must contend (APA, 2004; McCarthy, 2000). D'Augelli, Collins, and Hart (1987) pointed out that managing who is privy to one's sexual orientation and who is not can be an exhausting task. Those living in urban areas often have some control over who knows their sexual orientation and who does not; however, disclosure to one person in a rural area may mean disclosure to the entire community, so some people may decide to remain closeted (McCarthy). Gays living in metropolitan areas also have the opportunity to explore their sexuality and socialize with others with relative anonymity, whereas rural gays and lesbians may avoid contact or social events with openly gay

people for fear that community members will make assumptions of their sexuality (D'Augelli & Hart; McCarthy).

Rural gays and lesbians have frequently described their living environments as reflecting a "don't ask, don't tell" (Boulden, 2001, p. 71) mentality. Interviewing eight gay men from Wyoming on their current experiences of living in a rural area, Boulden found that his participants reported that although some family, friends, and community members may become supportive of their sexual orientation, it was often under the unstated condition that the individual become publicly asexual, not appear too gay, and expect heterosexuals to refuse to acknowledge or encourage their status as a sexual minority. Despite the challenges Boulden's participants faced, they felt satisfied with their living environment and enjoyed the "relaxed, laid back, slower pace (p. 65)" of rural life.

Rural Lesbians and Family Relationships

Coming out represents a significant moment for the family unit; however, most families lack a guide for coping with the situation (Valentine, Skelton, & Butler, 2003). Some people are naturally more close or distant with other family members, and the gay or lesbian individual can use their knowledge of their family to decide how to reveal sexual orientation and then navigate the situation (Valentine, Skelton, & Butler). Coming out and developing a gay or lesbian identity does not just involve the individual, and instead includes family members in the process (Valentine, Skelton, & Butler); in rural areas, characterized by conservative values, religious fundamentalism, and lack of visible gays and lesbians in the community (D'Augelli & Hart, 1987; McCarthy, 2000;

Williams, Williams, Pellegrino, & Warren, 2012), the process of integrating a new identity within the family can be magnified (D'Augelli & Hart).

The literature base addressing rural lesbians is scarce (McCarthy, 2000; Williams, Williams, Pellegrino, & Warren, 2012). While a special edition of the *Journal of Lesbian Studies* shed light into some aspects of rural lesbian life, research is needed to examine how rural lesbians navigate new family roles after coming out. The discussion below will focus on the specific issues rural lesbians face, as well as challenges of navigating new family roles by a non-rural sample.

Wang (2011) conducted a case study of a rural lesbian survivor of sexual violence to gain insight into her unique experience. "Judy" reported specific challenges because of the rural context in which she lives, such as conservative culture, religious fundamentalism, discrimination of sexual minorities, feeling isolated and lonely due to living in a rural context, low levels of anonymity, a small LGB community, and poor access to resources. Echoing Wang's findings, McCarthy (2000) found similar results when a she conducted a focus group with 10 rural lesbians, ages 18-52. The lesbians in this study reported feeling isolated and invisible in their communities, relying on word of mouth to find other lesbians to find support. The women reported receiving support from both heterosexual and homosexual peers, and expressed the importance of lesbian communities within their region. Additionally, these women reported that other lesbians coming out were often perceived as the first lesbian in the community, pointing to the underground nature of support networks.

Coming out is not a singular event and new family dynamics can develop after someone comes out (D'Augelli & Hart, 1987). Oswald (2000) conducted a unique study

investigating what happened when young women come out as bisexual or lesbian. Six college-aged women and 25 members of their social network, for a total of 31 participants, including parents, siblings, cousins, friends, and partners, were interviewed to collect different perspectives and determine how their coming out impacted relationships with important people in their lives. Through grounded theory analysis, one common theme across participants was changes in relationship structure, which the authors describe as the "internal and external boundaries of each network (p. 74)." Most participants reported that after coming out they were no longer interested in keeping relationships with people who were discriminatory to the LGB community. One participant described an experience in which she listened to her family tell homophobic jokes and the resulting distance she enacted after that event. Other participants experienced strengthened relationships when their support networks took a stand against homophobia. Overall, this study found that coming out encouraged the social network, and focal participants, to reevaluate their beliefs about homosexuality, causing some relationships to be restructured to include support for the lesbian or bisexual individual's sexual orientation and others to distance themselves from bigotry and homophobic people.

Additionally, a study by Swainson and Tasker (2006) investigated six lesbian couples' experiences with their families. Utilizing genograms to depict family relationships, the researchers found that partnered lesbian couples must navigate relationships within their families and their partners' families. For example, some lesbians were accepted by their families, but their partner was not, so the partner was excluded from family gatherings and events. The couples also reflected the changing

nature of relationships with family members. One participant reported that although her parents were initially unsupportive of the couple having a child, her parents became more accepting after their child was born. Another participant noted that her relationship with her parents improved after she was diagnosed with a serious illness. The study by Swainson and Tasker is significant because it demonstrated that family relationships are complex and changes can occur throughout the lifespan.

Areas for Future Research

Living environment can have a dramatic impact on one's experience of being gay or lesbian; moreover, characteristics such as nationality, religion, ethnic group, class, disability, and a myriad of other variables can also shape the lives of LGB (Liddle, 2007b). For example, Caucasian gays and lesbians in the United States reported receiving most of their social support from sexual minority friends rather than blood relatives or family, whereas African American lesbians reported receiving most social support from other members of the African American community, rather than their Caucasian, lesbian counterparts. Experiences are so varied that it may be difficult to generalize findings across an entire nation, thus recent research on LGB persons typically focuses on a smaller subgroup within the population. Liddle (2007b) posits that investigation of the lives of a particular group within the LGB population, particularly through qualitative methods, and utilizing researchers familiar with the groups' characteristics, are more likely to generate results that truly reflect lived experience.

Much of the previous literature on LGB experiences of coming out has focused on the initial reactions of parents after a child comes out, and has largely neglected how the family adjusts to the disclosure over time (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Oswald,

2002); furthermore, the literature is further lacking in attention to the experiences of rural LGB in general (Boulden, 2001; D'Augelli & Hart, 1987; McCarthy, 2000), and specifically lesbians (McCarthy; Williams, Williams, Pellegrino, & Warren, 2012). Considering the previous literature, there is a dearth of research addressing the experiences of rural lesbians navigating new family relationships after coming out.

Additionally, research outlining the long-term adjustment of families is nonexistent. Thus, this author will seek to examine the main themes arising in rural families once an individual reveals their status as a lesbian, utilizing semi-structured interviews, genogram construction, and grounded theory analysis. Specifically, this study will address the following questions:

1) How did coming out affect perceived relationships with family members?
2) What perceived changes in family relationships occurred?
3) How did coming out in a rural context impact the process of revealing one's sexual orientation?

Qualitative Approach

Qualitative methods allow researchers to investigate experiences, behaviors, feelings, and emotions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and to understand the personal meaning of one's life events (Hoyt & Bhati, 2007; Morrow, 2007). Through purposeful selection, small sample sizes allow for rich and thorough descriptions of people's experiences (Fassinger, 2005; Hoyt & Bhati). Additionally, qualitative methods are especially useful for studying phenomena or topics about which there exists little research, including specific issues experienced by minorities and special populations (Hoyt & Bhati; Morrow; Ponterotto, 2005; Strauss & Corbin; Yeh & Inman, 2007).

Grounded theory. One method of qualitative analysis, grounded theory, is considered to be the "market leader," and is one of the most established and respected methods of conducting qualitative research in a number of social science disciplines (Fassinger, 2005; Ponterotto, 2005); furthermore, it is one of the most frequently used forms of qualitative research published in the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* over the last 15 years (Ponterotto). A discovery-oriented process which is designed to be exploratory rather than generalizable (Ponterotto), grounded theory allows the researcher to create a theory grounded in the lived experiences of the participants (Fassinger, 2005). This method of analysis is also particularly useful for counseling psychologists interested in addressing issues of diversity and social justice through research (Fassinger).

Previous research on gay men, lesbians, and families has demonstrated an "urban bias," with little attention paid to the experiences of those living in rural areas (Boulden, 2011; D'Augelli & Hart, 1987; McCarthy, 2000). Rural gays and lesbians represent a unique population that has largely been ignored by the literature. Specifically, there is little research examining the impact of coming out on one's relationships with family members. Considering the complexity of coming out and the lack of attention paid to this topic, grounded theory was chosen to explore the unique experiences of rural lesbians, and to describe, understand, and clarify their experiences (Polkinghorne, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Methods

Participants

Participants in the current study included 11 self-identified lesbians between the ages of 21 and 56 (see Table 1). Nine of the participants identified as Caucasian and two were African American. Six participants described their socioeconomic status (SES) as

lower middle or working class, four characterized themselves as middle class, and one identified in upper middle class. All participants had at least a high school diploma. Ages at disclosure varied between 16 years of age and 49. Five participants were currently partnered at the time of the interview. One participant identified as Atheist, three as Christian, one as Buddhist, and the remaining six did not claim a current religious affiliation. Lastly, all participants identified growing up in a rural or mixed-rural county according to Isserman's (2005) definition.

Instruments

Semi-structured interview. Questions for the semi-structured interview were developed based the existing literature, the researchers' observations living in a rural area and working with local LGBT-affirmative organizations, and consultation with professionals with expertise in working with sexual minority groups. A pilot interview was first conducted to ensure the interview questions addressed the specific variables under investigation and eliminate the potential for confusion or truncated responses (Fassinger, 2005). The semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 60 – 120 minutes depending on how much the participant shared.

Genogram. There are many different ways to construct a genogram depending on the clinician's or researcher's purpose; however, there are some common characteristics shared by all. Symbols are chosen to represent factors such as age, sex, and marital status; for example, males are usually represented with a square and females with a circle. Family members are connected by lines to demonstrate the nature of their relationship; for example, children are often placed below their parents on a genogram, and siblings' symbols are often smaller than the identified individual. Lastly, interpersonal

relationships are represented by a variety of symbols to indicate characteristics such as closeness, distance, conflict, abandonment, etc. (McGoldrick, Shellenberger, & Petry, 2008). A sample genogram is included in Appendix A for further clarification. For the purposes of this study, genograms were utilized to collect important information about participants, including names, dates of birth, marriages, divorces, deaths, and characteristics of interpersonal relationships.

Researcher-as-the-Instrument

In qualitative research, it is impossible for investigators to separate their values, beliefs, and biases from the research process (Yeh & Inman, 2007). Yeh & Inman discuss the importance of recognizing the influence of one's "metatheoretical predispositions" (p. 375) and the impact of professional and personal experiences on shaping the study, selection of participants, interpretations, and development of theories. Unlike quantitative methods, in which the researcher is assumed to be an objective observer, qualitative methodology is influenced by the researcher's worldview. It is imperative the investigator remains aware of their subjectivity, demonstrating reflexivity with the research (Yeh & Inman). A major threat to the validity of the study can occur when the researcher's subjective experiences influence the study at hand. Thus, making one's biases explicit and detailing how they will be dealt with during auditing and memo-writing, which involve "monitoring the researcher's analytic decisions and documenting the researcher's emerging theoretical ideas, respectively," (Fassinger, 2005, p. 157) is a critical aspect of maintaining trustworthiness throughout the research (Yeh & Inman).

Results

Analyses

Grounded theory is achieved through coding of data and creating theories based on participants' responses. Coding in grounded theory refers to, "naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43)." The process of coding involves constant comparison of the data in which existing data is compared to newly collected data to discover similarities and differences (Charmaz). The purpose is to interpret and construct meaning from the narrative data collected in the interview and create a theoretical statement about the situation under investigation (Fassinger, 2005).

Initial Coding

Grounded theory is characterized by two major phases of coding: (1) initial coding, in which each line, word, or segment of data is named; and (2) focused coding (Charmaz, 2006). During initial coding, the transcribed data can be analyzed word-by-word, line-by-line, paragraph-by-paragraph, or incident-by-incident to develop meaning units (Charmaz; Fassinger, 2005). Meaning units are created when the participants' responses are broken down into themes; these themes are then labeled and compared to other meaning units to create overarching categories (Charmaz; Fassinger). The researcher in this study first utilized line-by-line coding to develop meaning units for each response. Then, using the comparative method of analysis, the researcher used incident-by-incident coding to compare each participant's experience with others' descriptions. The process of initial coding allowed the researcher to search for theoretical directions to investigate in later data collection and analysis (Charmaz).

Seventeen initial meaning units were discovered (see Table 2). Five themes addressed how each family processed and reacted to the participant's sexual orientation

disclosure: Pushed Out/Outed, Disruption of Homeostasis, Varying Reactions, Acceptance of Disapproval, and Image Concerns. These themes described how individuals came out to their families, the ways in which sexual orientation disclosure impacted their family in both the short and long term, levels of acceptance, and concerns about the family's image within their community. Seven themes described patterns of family communication: Less Talking About Feelings, Coming Out and Staying Out, Changing Communication, Censoring Information, Feeling Responsible for Communication, Educating Others, and Indirect Communication. These themes outlined the family's typical style of communication prior to sexual orientation disclosure, as well as concrete examples of how communication changed, for better or worse, after coming out. Next, four themes emerged in the participants' interactions with their community: Lack of LGB Support, Being Gay Is Not Okay, Intrapersonal Issues with Religion, and Careful Who Knows. These themes reflect the interaction between the participant and their experiences within their community. Additionally, these themes described messages individuals received about what it means to be a lesbian in a rural area, conflicts with growing up in a conservative, religious environment, and the impact of managing who is privy to one's sexual orientation. Lastly, two themes were noted that reflected Intrapersonal Struggles the participants experienced while coming out and making sense of their own sexual orientation: Going to Therapy and Being True To You. These themes demonstrate how individuals made sense of their sexual orientation in a rural environment that was not always accepting or approving. Of these meaning units, four overarching categories were created: Family Processes (Pushed Out/Outed; Disruption of Homeostasis; Varying Reactions; Acceptance of Disapproval; Image Concerns), Family

Communication (Less Talking About Feelings; Coming Out and Staying Out; Changing Communication; Censoring Information; Feeling Responsible for Communication; Educating Others; Indirect Communication), Community (Lack of LGB Support; Being Gay Is Not Okay; Intrapersonal Issues with Religion; Careful Who Knows), and Intrapersonal Struggles (Going to Therapy; Being True To You)).

Selective Coding

The last step in the coding process, selective coding, involves the creation of theory in which a central category is chosen that combines all other categories (Fassinger, 2005). A short narrative of the most important aspects of the data is created, which subsumes all categories and explains their relationships to the data as a whole. Creation of theory involves simultaneous comparison of data throughout collection, coding, conceptualizing, and theorizing so that new data are compared to emerging concepts until no new categories, themes, or relationships are discovered. After no new information is discovered, properties, relationships, and constructs are defined in the form of substantive theory about the phenomena under examination (Fassinger).

After examining meaning units and focused codes, the core story which emerged through the participants' responses was, *Dynamic Interactions on Long-Term Sexual Orientation Disclosure in a Conflicted Environment*. This phrase captures the experiences of coming out to one's self, family, and their community, and the long-term management of the process. This story is also reflected in the literature (D'Augelli & Hart, 1987) which described the process of coming out as not a static event, but rather occurring over and over in many different situations and contexts.

One participant embodied this category when they described the everlasting nature of choosing who to be out to when they said,

> Um but I carefully chose who I was going to be out to. And then at the church I do attend I was also very careful in choosing who to share that information with. Um, but as far as, I'd say just depending on the individuals I am probably more careful about what I share and I might be more careful about um how I interact with my partner when I've introduced her to other people or when I've had conversations that, where it makes sense for me to make reference to her. So, well I'd say yea because there's a colleague where I refer my partner as a roommate not too long ago whereas a couple other colleagues know that she is my partner and all that stuff. So I guess I'm careful of what I share to certain individuals and then I'm probably more comfortable or trusting of those whom I have come out to and it has been a positive experience. (P8).

Also within this theme was an underpinning of how one makes sense of their sexual orientation in an environment that doesn't always support this aspect of their life or allow expression of that part of their identity. One participant demonstrated this view by saying,

> but you know it's just like not being accepted and something like that, it's stuff like that, it's just like it has impacted you know the way I see people and the way like I feel about myself. Um and uh, yea it took me a long time because I was struggling you know with the whole being gay and being outed at the same time, and it was just you know, it was really a hard thing to you know come to terms with. Um but yea, I would say that is probably the biggest thing is how

> conservative some rural communities are. It's just like, it's hard to feel okay about yourself being gay in some rural communities, it's like you know you're going to be judged by every single person and then you've been told your entire life that it's wrong. So yea, it's really hard to be happy. (P11)

Finally*, Dynamic Interactions on Long-Term Sexual Orientation Disclosure in a Conflicted Environment* demonstrated ways in which participants learned to balance intrapersonal acceptance and expression of their sexual orientation within their environment in a way that would reduce conflict with unaccepting individuals.

Discussion

This section will address the results of the current study in relation to previous literature, including the process of coming out and specific challenges faced by rural sexual minorities. Additionally, it will also address limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

In the context of the rural environment, many participants reported experiences congruent with previous research findings, including little exposure to other gays and lesbians, families lacking accurate information about what it means to be queer, (Waldner & Magruder, 1999), feeling isolated, fearing rejection from family members (Matthews & Lease, 2000), difficulty finding affirmative social support networks (Boulden, 2001; D'Augelli & Hart, 1987; McCarthy, 2000), lack of privacy and anonymity (APA, 2004; McCarthy), and difficulty managing who is privy to one's sexual orientation (McCarthy). Furthermore, similar to the results of Boulden's (2001) study on rural gay men experiencing a "don't ask, don't tell" environment, many of the participants in this study reported that although they came out, many felt pressured to go back in the closet or

developed the need to censor and hide information about their lives that might indicate their sexual orientation. Thus, while the participants of this study did not report directly experiencing a "don't ask, don't tell" environment, the spirit of this concept was certainly present in guiding their lives and interactions with their community and family members.

Although this study did not directly aim to examine patterns of how participants came out and to whom, this process was discussed in the context of family members' reactions. Furthermore, the participants revealed coming out processes similar to findings from previous literature (Green, 2002; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003) reporting that most came out to friends and siblings first and then parents next.

Perhaps the most significant finding from the current study, which has been briefly described in previous literature, is more information about the actual process by which rural lesbians navigate family relationships after sexual orientation disclosure and the family's long-term adjustment processes. Previous literature has described the variation in adjustment over time within families (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008), noting that it is hard to predict the consequences of coming out on family relationships (Green). Families may react negatively at first but become more tolerant and accepting over time. Other families may experience no changes at all (Connolly, 2006; Green). Family roles and expectations may shift, as well as the ways in which closeness, distancing, and boundaries are experienced (Connolly); however, the disclosure of sexual orientation will generally be processed through the family's usual means of coping (Green). Furthermore, integrating new family roles after coming out is not unique to sexual minorities, but these issues appeared intensified in rural areas (D'Augelli & Hart, 1987).

Previous literature has also examined the experiences of women who identified as lesbian or bisexual (Oswald, 2000), but not solely lesbians, and not rural lesbians in particular. The study by Oswald found that many participants reported changes in social networks, including limiting ties with those who voiced discriminatory views of the LGB community; however, in the current study, a number of participants reported maintaining relationships with family members despite disapproval of their sexual minority status or experiencing some degree of rejection. In fact, a number of participants in the current study experienced quite negative reactions from family members, leading to a temporary disruption in the family's closeness that was eventually restored with some adjustments and modifications, namely through communication. It should be noted, that for the individuals who experienced negative reactions from family members, resolving homeostasis did not return the family to the previous level of closeness, at least not in the participants' view, however, they were able to maintain a relationship with unaccepting or disapproving family members by making adjustments in their relationships to minimize conflict. Furthermore, a number of participants in the current study reported an on-going process of monitoring relationships with family members, which was mediated, in most cases, by the participant choosing to not disclose information about their sexual orientation.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

First, this study demonstrated some significant strengths, including participants of various birth cohorts, a wide range of reactions from family members, and variations in amount of time post-disclosure. Thus, while these assets allowed for a wide-ranging sample, it also limits the ability to generalize findings to a larger group of rural lesbians.

Furthermore, considering that the goal of qualitative research, and specifically grounded theory, is to discover phenomena of which there has been little exploration, it is not atypical for generalizability to be limited. Thus, this study demonstrated no more limitation of generalizability than a typical study utilizing grounded theory would.

This sample was also limited by geographical region. Most of the participants in this study had lived and come out in the Appalachian, Midwest, or East coast regions of the United States. Thus, considering that their experiences have occurred mostly throughout the Eastern half of the United States, they might not be generalizable to individuals living in rural frontier areas.

This sample was also limited by a wide variation in experiences coming out. For example, some participants had quite positive experiences coming out, while others endured more struggles with their families in reestablishing homeostasis. It might be worthwhile to study these populations separately to delineate clear distinctions between these two populations and specific characteristics that contributed to a more positive or negative response from one's family.

Qualitative research is designed to limit influence from researcher bias. Additional measures were utilized to reduce researcher bias and enhance trustworthiness and credibility of this study; however, despite these attempts, it is possible that researcher's experiences, expectations, and biases influenced the data analysis process.

Additionally, to produce more generalizability, it would also be worthwhile if future research could study these phenomena using a larger sample size and different study methods to determine if these findings are reproducible. For example, future research could study long-term navigation of family dynamics through mixed methods or

quantitative methodology and utilize a larger sample to determine if these findings are generalizable.

Summary

This chapter reviewed findings from previous literature, research questions which guided the current study, the process of data analysis, and themes discovered in the interviews. Seventeen initial meaning units were discovered, which were grouped into four larger categories: Family Processes (Pushed Out/Outed; Disruption of Homeostasis; Varying Reactions; Acceptance of Disapproval; Image Concerns), Family Communication (Less Talking About Feelings; Coming Out and Staying Out; Changing Communication; Censoring Information; Feeling Responsible for Communication; Educating Others; Indirect Communication), Community (Lack of LGB Support; Being Gay Is Not Okay; Intrapersonal Issues with Religion; Careful Who Knows), and Intrapersonal Struggles (Going to Therapy; Being True To You). Finally, a substantive code, *Dynamic Interactions on Long-Term Sexual Orientation Disclosure in a Conflicted Environment,* was created, which described the core story that emerged in the data. Suggestions for future research and limitations of the current study were also addressed. The next chapter will review the findings from previous literature in more detail.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Introduction

There is an established base of literature describing the lives, challenges, and issues faced by gays and lesbians, yet significant gaps exist and sub-communities within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community have been ignored. Most research on sexual minorities is conducted with metropolitan samples, and the experiences of rural LGBT, and particularly lesbians, have not received much attention (Boulden, 2001; D'Augelli & Hart, 1987; Leedy & Connolly, 2007; McCarthy, 2000). Additionally, studies of LGBT and their families often focuses on parents' initial reactions to their child's coming out and overlooks the family's long-term adjustment (Hilton & Szymanski, 2011). This literature review aims to highlight some of the specific issues faced by rural lesbians, specifically related to the intersection between lesbian identity and family relationships.

Operational Definitions

According to the American Psychological Association (APA; 2008; 2011), sexual orientation refers to "an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and /or sexual attractions to men, women, or both sexes." Put more simply, it describes those to whom one is sexually and romantically attracted. Previous research has suggested that sexuality and sexual orientation exist along a continuum, ranging from attraction to the other sex only, to attraction to the same sex only (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953). Sexual orientation is generally divided into three categories: (1) heterosexual, or attracted to members of the other sex; (2) gay/lesbian, or attracted to members of the same sex; and (3) bisexual, or attracted to members of both sexes (APA, 2008; APA, 2011).

Bisexuals are thought to represent a unique population, whose experiences are different from their gay and lesbian counterparts, thus, this literature review will focus on gays and lesbians only.

Lesbian Identity Development

Many different models of gay and lesbian identity development exist, emphasizing different theories and stages of identity development, yet no model is universal. All models, however, describe similar stages and events that gays and lesbians experience while developing identity as a sexual minority (Liddle, 2007a). Summarizing the main theories of lesbian identity development, Liddle points out that most models describe the beginning stages with an assumption of heterosexuality; a young girl believes she will grow up to marry a man. As the girl continues to develop, she realizes she is different from her peers; for example, she may not be "boy-crazy during adolescence" (p. 52), or may be uninterested in getting married. Eventually, the girl might think about labeling herself as lesbian or bisexual, which can create negative feelings as some struggle to understand what this means for them and their future; some women fear others' reactions, which may include rejection, violence, and discrimination. Some, but not all, females progress from negative to positive feelings about sexual orientation and may eventually decide to apply a meaningful label (gay, lesbian, queer, etc.) to their sexual orientation. Once self-identification occurs, all models emphasize the importance of seeking support from similar individuals. It's not uncommon for sexual minorities to feel isolated during identity development and access to other gays and lesbians can provide support and facilitate healthy formation of identity. Following self-identification as a lesbian, some models propose women enter a stage of pride, in which

she feels angry at the heterosexist society and considers her lesbian identity to be a core component of her definition of self.

Throughout the process of lesbian identity development, the literature has demonstrated the importance of support from other sexual minorities (D'Augelli & Hart, 1987; Liddle, 2007a). During identity development, it is not uncommon for people to feel as if they are the only gay man or lesbian woman in the world, and support from other LGB can assure the individual they are not alone (McCarthy, 2000). Interaction with other LGB is also important for identity development; in fact, some researchers postulate that identity development does not truly begin until the LGB individual has found other LGB (McCarthy). Developing identity consists of a reference point; one must identify with others to consider themselves the same or different (McCarthy). Sexual orientation is expressed through attraction and relationships with others, and the group of people in which one seeks interpersonal relationships contributes to personal identity (APA, 2008).

Identity is also influenced by nonsexual relationships, including parents and siblings (Hilton & Szymanski, 2011; Liddle, 2007a; Waldner & Magruder, 1999; Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006). Some sexual minorities must contend with negative messages about their identity from their family of origin. According to Identity Development Theory, family members' reactions and coping can also influence the lesbian or gay man's sense of self (Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl). Identity Development Theory asserts that sexual minorities seek validation from significant others and internalize this feedback. Family members are often an inadvertent source of negative attitudes and stereotypes long before people realize they are gay, thus negative messages about sexual minorities may influence their beliefs about themselves as a gay male or

lesbian female (Waldner & Magruder). Considering that positive and negative reactions by family members may be incorporated into the individuals' sense of self (Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl), it is unsurprising that family support is imperative to the development of an affirmative identity (Hilton & Szymanski).

Coming Out

"Coming out" is a popular term used to describe several processes: awareness of same-sex attraction; disclosing sexual orientation to others; and identification with the gay and lesbian community (APA, 2008; APA, 2011). These processes are generally considered to occur in adolescence but can occur much later in life (APA, 2008; Hilton & Szymanski, 2011). Coming out is a complex decision and involves a number of factors, including self-differentiation, mental health, self-esteem, self-awareness of sexual orientation, life history of sexual behavior, and clarity of sexual identity (Green, 2002). Disclosure practices are uneven and most lesbians and gay men do not reveal their sexual orientation to everyone in their lives at the same time (Carnelley, et al., 2011; Green). Some may choose to remain "in the closet" and keep their sexual orientation private, others may come out to certain individuals, and some may come out to everyone (APA, 2008; APA, 2011).

Revealing one's sexual orientation to family members is challenging, but disclosing to parents seems to be especially difficult (Hilton & Szymanski, 2006) and is frequently the last step in the coming out process (Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006). Typically, lesbian and gay youth come out to peers first, followed by siblings, mothers, and fathers last (Green, 2002). A study by Savin-Williams and Ream (2003), investigated the varying levels of outness to family members of 17- to 25- year old college students.

The researchers found that the participants were more likely to disclose their sexual orientation to their mother face-to-face, than their father. It may be that LGB youth fear coming out to their fathers because they are more likely to react negatively (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008). When considering coming out to parents, there are often many factors involved in the decision, including (1) the importance of parents as a source of social support, social identity, and economic support (less relevant for adult offspring); (2) the availability of nonfamily social and economic support; and (3) the individual's perception of the advantages and disadvantages to themselves, the family members, and their relationship (Green).

Coming out can be risky; however, disclosing sexual orientation can have significant advantages for the individual. Those with a positive LGB identity demonstrate higher self-esteem and well-being, better psychological adjustment, and more opportunities to receive social support from other LGB (APA, 2008; D'Augelli & Hart, 1987; Carnelly, Heppner, Hicks, & Turner, 2001).

Family Relationships and Coming Out

Gays and lesbians are placed in a unique position post-disclosure in that they face the possibility of being rejected from their family, not because of something they have done, but because of their identity, a fundamental component to their sense of self (Connolly, 2006; Green, 2002). Unlike ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians do not usually share the same sexual minority status with parents (Connolly; Green). Generally, in groups that face discrimination, parents are able to socialize and prepare their children to deal with oppression because they share the same vulnerability to prejudice. Minority parents and children share characteristics that place them in the same position against

oppression; however, lesbian and gay youth are at a disadvantage because their parents are often unable to prepare them for dealing with prejudice (Green). In this case, gays and lesbians are deprived of the opportunity to witness loved ones cope with prejudice and discrimination (Connolly). Additionally, in minority families, parents can take on an additional protective role, but parents of lesbian and gay youth often do not experience the same oppressive forces. Rather than becoming allies, parents and children can end up taking sides against each other, leaving gay and lesbian youth "living with the enemy" (Green, p. 277). Their uncommon position makes LGB the only minority in America facing consistent family rejection (Hilton & Szymanski, 2011).

Coming out forces family members to reevaluate everything they have understood about homosexuality (Green, 2002; Matthews & Lease, 2000). Parents and siblings reexamine previously held beliefs about gender, sex, sexuality, and religion (Green; Matthews & Lease). Family members are often ignorant of issues faced by lesbians and gay men, or hold inaccurate assumptions (Green), and may apply the negative stereotypes and myths about sexual minorities to their family member (Matthews & Lease). Revealing sexual orientation can upset balance within the home, and the family can restore homeostasis by rejecting the individual who is no longer seen as an acceptable part of the family (Matthews & Lease).

Gays and lesbians are usually aware of their family's attitude on gender roles, sexual behavior, homosexuality, nonconformity, and religion, long before coming out; thus, fears of parental rejection or abuse often contribute to keeping ones identity secret (Matthews & Lease, 2000). Parental rejection is usually motivated by homophobia, a fear of AIDS, traditional values, and lack of knowledge along with little exposure to gays and

lesbians (Waldner & Magruder, 1999). Characteristics associated with negative parental reactions include conservative political ideologies, religiosity, having older parents, being a member of an ethnic minority, lack of education, attitudes about sex roles, and authoritarian parenting styles (Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006; Waldner & Magruder). Considering the risks of coming out, it is unsurprising that some people choose to keep their sexual orientation hidden from family members (APA, 2008). Lack of support and negative familial reactions are associated with an increased risk of alienation, depression, suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and substance abuse (Hilton & Szymanski, 2011).

Coming Out and the Family's Response

Coming out is a developmental milestone, both for gays and lesbians, as well as their family members (Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006). Like the lesbian or gay individual, family members often move through a similar coming out process (Matthews & Lease, 2000), needing time to adapt, emerge, and understand the disclosure (Connolly, 2006). Even if parents suspected their child is gay, they can still feel caught off-guard by the revelation (Connolly). On the other hand, parents who did not suspect their child was LGB, may have a harder time adjusting to the disclosure (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008). Parents and siblings can experience feelings of grief (Hilton & Szymanski, 2011), similar to Kübler-Ross' stages of grief, which include denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Matthews & Lease). Parents grieve the loss of the child they thought they had and the loss of dreams for their child (Matthews & Lease). Expectations of a traditional marriage, having children, and carrying on the family legacy are

challenged (Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl). Family members may also feel isolated from their community and fear rejection from other family members (Matthews & Lease).

There are a few characteristics that set accepting and rejecting families apart. Cohesion is the overall connectedness within the family system and the emotional bonding that family members have toward one another, while adaptability is the extent to which a family is able to change when confronted with novel situations (Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006). Families with high cohesion, adaptability, and warm relationships are in a better position to accept the lesbian or gay individual and reject the negative stereotypes; to reject a family member because of their sexual orientation may be a violation of the rules of a cohesive, adaptable, and warm family (Green, 2002; Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl). The family's ability to cope with the disclosure is also related to other factors, such as frequency of contact with family members, ability to deal with conflict, attitudes toward sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular, as well as factors in the family's unique sociocultural niche, including variables such as race, ethnicity, social class, religiosity, and legal or political factors (Green). Family Stress Theory posits that families with strong psychological resources in place prior to disclosure are in a better position to respond to stressful events, while those with little resources may accept the negative stereotypes and beliefs about lesbian or gay individuals (Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl); furthermore, families who seek additional resources and support often have more positive outcomes (Connolly, 2006). Parent-child relationships prior to coming out may be the best predictor of parents' reactions and adjustment; although a violation of boundaries, roles, and beliefs occurred, secure attachments between parent and child remains (Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl). A study

by Hilton and Szymanski (2011) demonstrates that relationships prior to disclosure might also be predictors of siblings' reactions and adjustment. The researchers interviewed 14 siblings of an LGB person, and eleven reported changes in their relationship after their siblings' disclosure. The participants reported that changes were a magnification of preexisting relationships with their siblings; those that were close before, became more close, and those that were distant, became more distant.

Coming out can transform many aspects of the family system (Green, 2002) as families adapt to their new roles (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008). Family adjustment after disclosure is a life-long process (Oswald, 2002), which varies among families (Heatherington & Lavner), and it is hard to predict the consequences of coming out on family relationships (Green). Families may react negatively at first but become more tolerant and accepting over time. Other families may experience no changes at all and continue to function the same as they did before the disclosure (Connolly, 2006; Green). Families that were distant and conflict-avoidant before will likely remain so after; those who were intrusive and critical before the disclosure are not likely to suddenly become more accepting and respectful of boundaries (Green). Disclosure can open communication and intimacy and the family may become stronger, closer, and more honest, whereas fighting families can generate the sort of conflict that destroys the family system completely. Family roles and expectations may shift, as well as the ways in which closeness, distancing, and boundaries are experienced (Connolly); however, the disclosure of sexual orientation will most often be processed through the family's usual means of coping (Green).

Rural Sexual Minorities

Previous research investigating the role of coming out on sexual minorities and their families has generally used metropolitan samples (Boulden, 2011; D'Augelli & Hart, 1987; McCarthy, 2000). For families living in rural settings, the process may be governed by different factors given some of the critical differences between metropolitan and non-metropolitan norms, values, and practices. Conceptualizing rural, while seemingly a simple process, has been approached in various ways in the literature (McCarthy; Schank & Skovholt, 2006). Common factors of the definition often include census bureau standards of numerical population, population density, geography, and distance from urban centers (McCarthy; Schank & Skovholt). The U.S. Bureau of Census (2010) defines rural in exclusionary terms, declaring rural regions as those which do not meet criteria of an urban area or an urban cluster. Urban areas are those which contain "densely developed territory, and encompass residential, commercial, and other non-residential urban land uses" (U.S. Bureau of Census) with a population of 50,000 people or more. Urban clusters must contain between 2,500 and 50,000 people; therefore, considering the definitions of urban areas/clusters, rural is defined as all population, housing, and territories of a region with 2,500 people or less. In 2010, 19.3% of Americans lived in areas considered rural by the U.S. Census Bureau.

Rural communities are often characterized by conservative values, traditionalist views, religious fundamentalism, resistance to change, high visibility for its residents, lack of confidentiality and a tendency to view problems as personal rather than system-based, and there is often less tolerance for those who do not conform to community norms (Leedy & Connolly, 2007). Rural regions are thought to be autonomous, cohesive,

and highly integrated (McCarthy, 2000). Residents are generally satisfied with their community, and enjoy the quality of life, social atmosphere, low crime rates, familiarity with residents, and sense of community (McCarthy).

Integrating new family roles after coming out is not unique to sexual minorities, but these issues are intensified in rural areas (D'Augelli & Hart, 1987). Rural gays and lesbians face specific challenges their metropolitan counterparts do not, such as invisibility, extreme isolation, unsupportive social environments, fear of rejection and job loss, few or no public places to socialize, and little or no organizational and structural supports (Boulden, 2001; D'Augelli & Hart; McCarthy, 2000). In addition tothe existing obstacles, lack of economic resources and location may prevent many from even accessing the Internet, which could provide normative information and social support (McCarthy).

Socialization with other gays and lesbians is often difficult in rural areas for a number of reasons. Gay communities are notoriously invisible in rural areas, due to a justifiable fear for safety (Boulden, 2001; D'Augelli & Hart, 1987; McCarthy, 2000). McCarthy, in examining a group of rural lesbians, noted that gay communities in rural areas are often maintained secretively, creating the invisibility. In fact, the participants of McCarthy's study mentioned that when a rural lesbian came out in their town, she was often perceived as the first gay or lesbian person that their friend, acquaintance, or coworker had ever met. The secrecy and privacy of these networks is often needed. However, it creates a double-edged sword for other gays and lesbians (McCarthy). The covert nature of existing support groups for lesbians and gay men in rural areas can lead many to feel isolated and alone (APA, 2004). Support from other gays and lesbians may

help buffer the effects of minority stress (Liddle, 2007a), but the guardedness of these networks in rural areas prevent many from reaping the benefits.

The theme of isolation is a frequently reported occurrence in the lives of rural gays and lesbians (McCarthy, 2000), and can inhibit the process of developing supportive networks (D'Augelli & Hart, 1987). Unavailability of social supports may be especially damaging to lesbian and gay youth, who are incapable of relocating to more accepting environments because of their economic and geographic dependence on their parents (McCarthy).

During identity development, exposure to other gays and lesbians is important to creating a healthy sense of self (D'Augelli & Hart, 1987; Liddle, 2007a). In rural areas, the development of a lesbian or gay identity may be more difficult because information about others is inaccessible or more challenging to find (McCarthy, 2000). Characteristics that are typical of rural areas can also hinder identity development. An interesting study by Oswald (2002) demonstrates that invisibility can also be a threat to identity. Oswald conducted focus groups with gays and lesbians who had moved away from their families about their experiences returning home to attend heterosexual weddings. Weddings were chosen as an event worthy of investigation because they represent a culmination of heterosexual assumptions, symbolizing the "legal, material, family, religious, and social benefits that our society denies GLBTQ people on the grounds that doing so defends or preserves family life (p. 327)." Oswald discovered that among her participants, those from rural areas made specific distinctions between themselves and the urban participants; in fact, Oswald argued that the rural participants constructed their experiences as distinctly different from the other participants. The rural

participants described weddings as a place where family, religion, and community overlapped, often forcing participants to hide their sexual orientation to avoid ignorance or bigotry. With the act of hiding one's identity, the participants reflected feeling invisible to their friends and family. One participant, "Jack," described an incident in which his sister was set to introduce him and his partner of 10 years to the wedding guests, but instead of acknowledging their relationship, Jack's partner was introduced as his friend. Another participant, "Dave," described his experience at a wedding in which his partner was purposefully excluded and wedding guests attempted to match-make him with female guests. In addition to invisibility, the participants also demonstrated that identity and family's adjustment to one's sexual orientation is not a static process and instead, is managed in different settings and contexts, and influenced by others, including family and community.

Privacy and safety are frequently issues with which rural gays and lesbians must contend (APA, 2004; McCarthy, 2000). The lack of privacy has led some rural gays and lesbians to rent post office boxes several hours away from home to receive gay magazines and literature in the mail (McCarthy). D'Augelli, Collins, and Hart (1987) pointed out that managing who is privy to one's sexual orientation and who is not can be an arduous and exhausting task. In a small town, being out to some may mean being out to everyone. Those living in urban areas can often exert some control over who knows their sexual orientation and who does not; however, disclosure to one person in a rural area may mean disclosure to the entire community; therefore, some may decide to remain closeted (McCarthy). Unlike urban areas, which can provide some anonymity, rural gays and lesbians may also avoid contact or social events with openly gay people for fear that

community members will make assumptions about their sexuality (D'Augelli & Hart; McCarthy).

Boulden (2001) reflected on his own experiences as a gay male in Wyoming and interviewed eight other gay men about their current experiences of living in a frontier state. All participants noted that they chose to live in Wyoming and had not escaped to an urban setting, contesting the previous notion that rural gays often migrated to urban areas to flee their oppressive environments. In fact, Boulden's participants reported feeling satisfied with their living environment and enjoyed the "relaxed, laid back, slower pace" (p. 65) of rural life. These men reported sharing many characteristics associated with rural communities, including appreciating the nature of their surroundings, the importance of friendly neighbors, and being involved in community affairs. The participants of Boulden's study reflected previous research which describes rural communities as reflecting the "don't ask, don't tell" mentality (D'Augelli & Hart, 1987). Some family, friends, and community members may become supportive, but under the unstated condition that the individual become publicly asexual, not appear too gay, and expect heterosexuals to refuse to acknowledge or encourage their status as a sexual minority (Boulden; D'Augelli & Hart). These men also described the common notion of hidden social support networks for gays and lesbians, and described difficulty finding and becoming a part of the loosely connected network of gays and lesbians in the community (Boulden).

Rural Lesbians and Family Relationships

Coming out represents a significant moment for the family unit; however, many gay and lesbian individuals and their families lack a guide or reference point for dealing

with the situation (Valentine, Skelton, & Butler, 2003). Some people are naturally more close or distant with other family members, and sexual minorities can use their knowledge of their family when deciding how to reveal sexual orientation (Valentine, Skelton, & Butler). Coming out and developing a gay or lesbian identity does not just involve the individual, but also includes family members in the process (Valentine, Skelton, & Butler); furthermore, in rural areas the process of integrating a new identity within the family can be magnified (D'Augelli & Hart, 1987). The literature base addressing rural lesbians is scarce (McCarthy, 2000; Williams, Williams, Pellegrino, & Warren, 2012) and there is nothing examining how rural lesbians navigate new family relationships after coming out. The discussion below focuses on the specific issues rural lesbians face, as well as challenges of navigating new family roles by a non-rural sample.

Wang (2011) conducted a case study of a rural lesbian survivor of sexual violence to gain insight into "Judy's" unique experience. Judy reported specific challenges because of the rural context in which she lives, such as conservative culture, religious fundamentalism, discrimination of sexual minorities, feeling isolated and lonely, low levels of anonymity, a small LGB community, and poor access to resources. Echoing Wang's findings, McCarthy (2000) found similar results when she conducted a focus group with 10 rural lesbians, ages 18-52. The lesbians in this study reported feeling isolated and invisible in their communities, relying on word of mouth to find other lesbians for support. The women described receiving affirmation and encouragement from both heterosexual and homosexual peers, and expressed the importance of lesbian communities within their region. Additionally, these women reported that recently out

lesbians were often perceived as the first lesbian in the community, highlighting the underground nature of support networks.

Coming out is not a singular event and new family dynamics can develop after someone comes out (D'Augelli & Hart, 1987). Oswald (2000) conducted a unique study investigating what occurred within relationships after young women came out as bisexual or lesbian. A total of 31 participants, including 6 "focal participants" and 25 members of their social network, including parents, siblings, cousins, friends, and partners were interviewed to collect different perspectives and determine how their coming out impacted relationships with important people in their lives. Through grounded theory analysis, one emerging theme identified across participants was changes in relationship structure, which the author described as the "internal and external boundaries of each network" (p. 74). Most participants reported that after coming out they were no longer interested in keeping relationships with people who were discriminatory to the LGB community. One participant described an experience in which she heard family members tell homophobic jokes and decided to distance herself from those individuals after that incident. Other participants experienced strengthened relationships when their support networks took a stand against homophobia. Overall, this study found that coming out encouraged the social network and focal participants to reevaluate their beliefs about homosexuality. Some women found they also needed to restructure relationships with others, either by distancing themselves from bigotry and homophobic people, or incorporating more support in existing relationships.

Additionally, a noteworthy study by Swainson and Tasker (2006) utilized genogram construction to investigate six lesbian couples' experiences with their families and

identify emerging themes. The participants demonstrated that lesbian couples must navigate relationships within both partners' families. Four couples reported that they were accepted by at least one side of their families of origin. Four individual participants also described how their family members accepted them, but did not accept their partner. In these families, one's status as a lesbian was not acknowledged, even if others knew. . Despite rejection of some partners, all participants believed maintaining family ties were important and were supportive of their partners' efforts to preserve relationships. Interestingly, when constructing genograms, the couples that reported rejection of partners had difficulty defining themselves as a family and produced separate genograms of their family of origin. The participants in this study also reported changes in family relationships over time. One participant, "Ann," noted that that her parents were unsupportive of Ann's decision to have a child with her partner, yet her parents became more supportive after the child was born. Other participants reported that serious or terminal illness within the family brought members closer and improved acceptance of individuals and their partners. Using genograms to describe their experiences, the participants were able to communicate basic information about family members. Incidentally, participants' family members included in the genogram were mostly considered accepting of their sexual orientation. The study by Swainson and Tasker was significant because it highlighted the changing nature of family relationships and the utility of genogram construction to capture relationship restructuring.

Conclusions

Much of the previous literature on LGB experiences of coming out has focused on the initial reactions of parents after an adolescent or adult child comes out, and has

largely neglected how the family adjusts to the disclosure over time (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Hilton & Szymanski, 2011; Oswald, 2002); furthermore, the literature is lacking in attention to the experiences of rural LGB in general (Boulden, 2001; D'Augelli & Hart, 1987; Leedy & Connolly, 2007; McCarthy, 2000), and specifically lesbians (McCarthy, 2000; Williams, Williams, Pellegrino, & Warren, 2012). A family systems perspective emphasizes the role of outside variables affecting the interpersonal relationships of the family (Heatherington & Lavner); therefore, it is worthwhile to investigate the impact rural environments have on lesbians' family relationships after coming out. Additionally, research outlining the long-term adjustment of families is nonexistent. A qualitative approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews, genogram construction, and grounded theory analysis, will seek to identify the main themes arising in rural families once individuals reveal their status as a lesbian. Specifically, this study will address the following questions:

1) How did coming out affect perceived relationships with family members?
2) What perceived changes in family relationships occurred?
3) How did coming out in a rural context impact the process of revealing one's sexual orientation?

Chapter III: Methodology

Design Rationale

Qualitative methods allow researchers to investigate experiences, behaviors, feelings, and emotions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and to understand the personal meaning of one's life events (Hoyt & Bhati, 2007; Morrow, 2007). Through purposeful selection, small sample sizes allow for rich and thorough descriptions of people's experiences (Fassinger, 2005; Hoyt & Bhati). Additionally, qualitative methods are especially useful for studying phenomena or topics about which there exists little research, including specific issues experienced by minorities and special populations (Hoyt & Bhati; Morrow; Ponterotto, 2005; Strauss & Corbin; Yeh & Inman, 2007).

One method of qualitative analysis, grounded theory, is considered to be the "market leader," and is one of the most established and respected methods of conducting qualitative research in a number of social science disciplines (Fassinger, 2005; Ponterotto, 2005); furthermore, it is one of the most frequently used forms of qualitative research published in the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* over the last 15 years (Ponterotto). A discovery-oriented process which is designed to be exploratory rather than generalizable (Ponterotto), grounded theory allows the researcher to create a theory grounded in the lived experiences of the participants (Fassinger, 2005). This method of analysis is also particularly useful for counseling psychologists interested in addressing issues of diversity and social justice through research (Fassinger).

Previous research on gay men, lesbians, and families has demonstrated an "urban bias," with little attention paid to the experiences of those living in rural areas (Boulden, 2011; D'Augelli & Hart, 1987; McCarthy, 2000). Rural gays and lesbians represent a

unique population that has largely been ignored by the literature. Specifically, there is little research examining the impact of coming out on one's relationships with family members. Considering the complexity of coming out and the lack of attention paid to this topic, grounded theory was chosen to explore the unique experiences of rural lesbians, and to describe, understand, and clarify their experiences (Polkinghorne, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Participants

The spectrum of sexual identity is large and can include lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning/queer, intersex, asexual, and two-spirited individuals (LGBTQIA2); however, this focused on the experiences of lesbian women only. Others identifying as attracted to the same sex, such as gay men and bisexuals will be excluded from this investigation for two reasons: (1) both gay men and bisexuals represent distinctly separate populations and may have different experiences from their lesbian counterparts, thus (2) inclusion of data from gay men and bisexuals may create too much heterogeneity and limit the development of a grounded theory.

Participants for this study must have been at least 18 years of age and identified as a lesbian. It is important to respect participants' processes of coming out, keeping in mind that they may have not revealed their sexual orientation to all family members; however, those eligible for this study must have had some experience disclosing their sexual orientation to parental figures and/or siblings.

Additionally, eligible participants for this study must have experienced some of their coming out process in a rural environment. Initially, this researcher selected the definition of rural outlined by the U.S. Census Bureau, which describes rural regions as

all population, housing, and territories of a region with 2,500 people or less. However, it became evident that this definition was too narrow in scope and could exclude many potential participants. The researcher consulted with the committee chair and the definition of rural outlined by Isserman (2005) was chosen instead, specifically the criteria for rural and mixed-rural counties because of the ability to more accurately capture characteristics constituting rural areas. Isserman's (2005) county-wide assessment recognizes the varying qualities of counties, noticing that some are mostly urban or mostly rural, and other counties are mixed. Isserman (2005) described four types of counties, (a) rural, (b) urban, (c) mixed rural, and (d) mixed urban. A rural county has a population density of less than 500 people per square mile, and 90% of the county's population is in rural areas or the county does not have an urban area with a population greater than 10,000 people. An urban county has a population density of at least 500 people per square mile, 90% of the county's population resides in urban areas, and population in urbanized areas is at least 50,000 people or 90% of the county's population. Isserman (2005) defined mixed rural as a county meeting neither the urban nor the rural criteria and its population density is less than 320 people per square mile. Lastly, mixed urban is defined as a county meeting neither the urban nor rural criteria, and its population density is at least 320 people per square mile.

In contrast to the definition set forth by the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), which described rural regions as all population, housing, and territories of a region with 2,500 people or less, the definition outlined by Isserman (2005), specifically the criteria for rural and mixed-rural counties, were chosen for this study because of the ability to more accurately capture characteristics constituting rural areas. For example, according to the

U.S. Census Bureau, the city of Farmville, Virginia, would not be considered rural because having a population of 8,079 inhabitants, it exceeds the limit of 2,500 people; however, this area certainly would not be considered metropolitan or urban. According to Isserman's (2005) county-based definitions, Farmville, as subsumed by Prince Edward County, would be considered a rural county because it contains 66 residents per square mile and does not contain an urban area with 10,000 or more individuals. To determine rural eligibility, participants reported the city and county in which they grew up, then the researcher used population information from the U.S. Census Bureau to determine if they met criteria for a rural or mixed-rural county.

Qualitative studies often utilize purposeful selection of participants in the initial phase of the investigation (Fassinger, 2005), in which information-rich cases are sought to provide substantial contributions to the phenomena under investigation (Polkinghorne, 2005). Theoretical sampling is then used to reach saturation, in which new participants are added or the researcher returns to previous participants for clarification and elaboration of previous interviews (Fassinger). The purpose is to clarify and substantiate existing categories and the interrelationships that are emerging through the coding process. Theoretical saturation occurs when no new information is being discovered about the participants. When categories of data and their properties are able to thoroughly capture the participants' experiences and the interrelationships have been thoroughly specified, data collection ceases (Fassinger). Saturation is usually reached with 8 – 15 participants (Polkinghorne).

For this study, participants were recruited through the Safe Zone listserv of Radford University, the LGBTQ center of Virginia Tech, and personal contacts within

the community. An email was sent to Safe Zone and the LGBTQ center, and a letter was given to personal contacts, outlining the nature and purpose of the study, as well as the researcher's contact information (see Appendix B. Those interested in participating were asked to contact the researcher and complete a short screening process to determine if they met inclusion criteria. Snowball sampling was used to identify possible participants through those who had already been interviewed.

Instruments

Semi-structured interview. Interviewing is the most common form of data collection in grounded theory (Fassinger, 2005), allowing the researcher to gain a full and detailed account of the phenomena under investigation (Polkinghorne, 2005). Yielding flexibility, yet providing loose framework, a semi-structured interview allows the participants to describe their experiences in their own words while responding to open-ended questions and prompts (Fassinger).

Questions for the semi-structured interview were developed based on the existing literature, the researchers' observations living in a rural area and working with local LGBT-affirmative organizations, and consultation with professionals with expertise in working with sexual minority groups. A pilot interview was first conducted to ensure the interview questions addressed the specific variables under investigation and eliminate the potential for confusion or truncated responses (Fassinger, 2005). The semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 60 – 120 minutes depending on how much the participant shared.

Genogram. Genograms convey information about a family and their relationships over at least three generations, and provide a tangible, graphic representation of complex

family structures and systems (McGoldrick, Shellenberger, & Petry, 2008). They are especially useful considering they provide an "efficient summary, allowing for a person unfamiliar with a case to grasp quickly a huge amount of information about a family and to scan for potential problems and resources" (McGoldrick, Shellenberger, & Petry, p. 3). Genograms have become more popular and are widely used in various counseling settings. They are often used as a therapeutic tool for both client and therapist to examine family history, patterns, rules, secrets, and communication (Magnuson & Shaw, 2003).

There are many different ways to construct a genogram depending on the clinician's or researcher's purpose; however, there are some common characteristics shared by all. Symbols are chosen to represent factors such as age, sex, and marital status; for example, males are usually represented with a square and females with a circle. Family members are connected by lines to demonstrate the nature of their relationship; for example, children are often placed below their parents on a genogram, and siblings' symbols are often smaller than the identified individual. Lastly, interpersonal relationships are represented by a variety of symbols to indicate characteristics such as closeness, distance, conflict, abandonment, etc. (McGoldrick, Shellenberger, & Petry, 2008). A sample genogram is included in Appendix A for further clarification. For the purposes of this study, genograms were utilized to collect important information about participants, including names, dates of birth, marriages, divorces, deaths, and characteristics of interpersonal relationships.

Researcher-as-the-Instrument

In qualitative research, it is impossible for investigators to separate their values, beliefs, and biases from the research process (Yeh & Inman, 2007). Yeh & Inman discuss

the importance of recognizing the influence of one's "metatheoretical predispositions" (p. 375) and the impact of professional and personal experiences on shaping the study, selection of participants, interpretations, and development of theories. Unlike quantitative methods, in which the researcher is assumed to be an objective observer, qualitative methodology is influenced by the researcher's worldview. It is imperative the investigator remains aware of their subjectivity, demonstrating reflexivity with the research (Yeh & Inman). A major threat to the validity of the study can occur when the researcher's subjective experiences influence the study at hand. Thus, making one's biases explicit and detailing how they will be dealt with during auditing and memo-writing, which involve "monitoring the researcher's analytic decisions and documenting the researcher's emerging theoretical ideas, respectively," (Fassinger, 2005, p. 157) is a critical aspect of maintaining trustworthiness throughout the research (Yeh & Inman).

Procedure

First, permission was received from Radford University's Institutional Review Board. Then, an email was sent to Safe Zone of Radford University and the LGBTQ center of Virginia Teach, and a letter was given to personal contacts, outlining the nature and purpose of the study, as well as the researcher's contact information (see Appendix B). Those interested in participating were asked to contact the researcher to discuss eligibility requirements and complete a short screening process to ensure they met inclusion criteria. If inclusion criteria were met and the individual agreed to participate, informed consent was verbally reviewed and an interview was scheduled at Radford University or another mutually agreeable location.

At the beginning of the meeting, informed consent was reviewed and contact information for the researcher and committee chair were provided. After the participant agreed to participate, the semi-structured interview began and was recorded on videotape for transcription purposes. At the start of the interview, the participant was asked to describe their family of origin and creation of the genogram began. The development of the genogram was not static and continued throughout the interview.

Considering the sensitive nature of the research questions and the emotional responses some may have, additional safeguards were put in place to protect the participants' identity and respond to the possibility of distress. Participants had an opportunity to discuss their reactions at the end of the interview; furthermore, they received a list of mental health and LGBT resources in the community. Interview data was transcribed for analysis purposes and participants were assigned a pseudonym, along with any family members discussed in the interview or genogram. After analysis of data was completed, the participants received a copy of the results and were asked if the researcher's interpretation accurately reflected their experiences. Specifically, the participants were asked the following questions: How well does this theme summarize/speak to your experience? How was your experience similar or different? Is there anything you think is missing from this? Is there a way to improve this summary or theme? Do you agree/disagree with the theme?

Analyses

The goal of grounded theory is to develop theory that is "derived from data, systematically gathered, and analyzed through the research process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12)." In other words, the theory is "grounded" in the data participants provide

when describing their lived experiences (Fassinger, 2005). The researcher does not begin with a preconceived notion; rather, the researcher allows the theory to develop on its own (Strauss & Corbin). This method does not assume a single objective reality (Ponterotto, 2005), but instead accepts socially constructed realities and truths and depends on the interaction between participant and researcher to create meaning. It focuses on the expectations and assumptions of the researcher, and uses participants' quotations to bring life to their experiences (Fassinger). In summary, grounded theory allows the researcher to identify common themes based on participants' descriptions of their experiences and creates a theory to explain the phenomena under investigation.

Coding

Grounded theory is achieved through coding of data and creating theories based on participants' descriptions. Coding in grounded theory refers to "naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43). Researchers choose codes to describe the data based on the "languages, meanings, and perspectives through which we learn about the empirical world, including those of our participants as well as our own" (Charmaz, p. 47). Through coding the researcher can define and describe the data and begin to understand what the data is saying. The process of coding involves constant comparison of the data in which existing data is compared to newly collected data to discover similarities and differences (Charmaz). The purpose is to interpret and construct meaning from the narrative data collected in the interview and create a theoretical statement about the situation under investigation (Fassinger, 2005).

Grounded theory is characterized by two major phases of coding: (1) initial coding, in which each line, word, or segment of data is named; and (2) focused coding, in which the most frequent or significant themes from the initial phase are used to organize, synthesize, and integrate the data (Charmaz, 2006). Initial coding allows the researcher to search for theoretical directions to investigate in later data collection and analysis, while focused coding uses the most frequent or significant codes from the initial phase to categorize the data and create more conceptual and encompassing codes, explaining larger segments of data (Charmaz).

In initial coding, the transcribed data is analyzed for meaning units; the data can be transcribed on a word-by-word, line-by-line, paragraph-by-paragraph, or incident-by-incident analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Fassinger, 2005). Meaning units are created when the participants' responses are broken down into themes; these themes are then labeled and compared to other meaning units to create overarching categories (Charmaz; Fassinger). In this study, the researcher first utilized line-by-line coding to develop meaning units for each response. Then, using the comparative method of analysis, the researcher reexamined each response and used incident-by-incident coding to compare each participant's experience with others.

The second phase, or focused coding, involves further explication and organization of the relationships among categories. The most significant or frequent meaning unit categories are organized into larger groups that subsume several categories (Charmaz; Fassinger). Focused coding can occur more generally through the method of constant comparison of data-to-data and codes-to-codes, or it can be achieved through axial coding. Initial coding separates the data into distinct codes, while axial coding

synthesizes and explains the data by reuniting the data into a coherent whole (Charmaz; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). However, axial coding can become technical and burdensome during the analytic process (Charmaz), thus it is simply an additional tool the researcher can utilize, but is not necessary for focused coding. The last step in the coding process, selective coding, involves the creation of theory in which a central category is chosen that combines all other categories (Fassinger, 2005). A short narrative of the most important aspects of the data is created, which subsumes all categories and explains their relationships to the data as a whole. Creation of theory involves simultaneous comparison of data throughout collection, coding, conceptualizing, and theorizing so that new data are compared to emerging concepts until no new categories, themes, or relationships are discovered. After no new information is discovered, properties, relationships, and constructs are defined in the form of substantive theory about the phenomena under examination (Fassinger).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is a critical component of qualitative research, thus it was addressed throughout the analysis process through the inclusion of outside auditing, memo writing, and participant feedback of final analyses. Although Strauss and Corbin (1998) do not outline the specific requirements of auditing, many qualitative investigators include this component in their studies (Fassinger, 2005). Fassinger notes that auditing is primarily used in two ways. Peer debriefing occurs when the researchers' coding, categorizing, and theorizing are examined, whereas inquiry auditing occurs when the overall process and substantive theory are examined to ensure the study has followed acceptable procedures (Fassinger). This study utilized an auditor with experience in

qualitative dissertations who conducted peer debriefing and inquiry auditing. Memo writing can assist in establishing trustworthiness because it provides the details of all decisions made during the research process, including choices about how the data is collected and analyzed. Memo writing documents the study as it develops by making the researchers' decisions transparent and available to the reader (Fassinger). Lastly, trustworthiness was addressed through participant feedback after data collection and synthesis. Participant responses were summarized and sent to all participants. Interviewees were asked to provide their feedback on whether summarization and analysis of the data accurately reflected their experiences. The researcher heard back from three participants, all of whom agreed with the interpretation of the responses. One participant stated, "I think you captured my comments accurately, and your categories are spot on." Another participant commented that they enjoyed reading through the themes and did not provide any specific feedback about the interpretation of the results. Lastly, P9 stated that although she did not discuss the theme of censoring information in our interview, she agreed with this category and gave an example of how she engages in censoring information in her life. Additional details from P9's response to the Censoring Information category is described further in the results section. Thus, based on the feedback from these participants, no changes were made to the themes that emerged.

Chapter IV: Results

This chapter reviews the research questions to place the participants' responses in context of the researcher's aim of study. The process of data analysis, including participant characteristics, a brief review of grounded theory, coding, and trustworthiness, are discussed. Lastly, themes that emerged from the data will be highlighted.

Review of the Research Questions

In order to provide context in which participants' responses were analyzed, the research questions are reviewed. Previous literature has thoroughly explored the initial responses of parents after their child comes out; however, the literature has failed to address or examine how families adjust over time to the disclosure (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Hilton & Szymanski, 2011; Oswald, 2002). Additionally, the literature has largely neglected the experiences of rural LGB in general (Boulden, 2001; D'Augelli & Hart, 1987; Leedy & Connolly, 2007; McCarthy, 2000), and specifically lesbians (McCarthy, 2000; Williams, Williams, Pellegrino, & Warren, 2012). Family systems perspective also takes into consideration the influence of outside variables as influential on family relationships (Heatherington & Lavner), thus it is important to investigate the impact of rurality on lesbians' family relationships after coming out. The following study was proposed in order to understand the following questions:

1) How did coming out affect perceived relationships with family members?
2) What perceived changes in family relationships occurred?
3) How did coming out in a rural context impact the process of revealing one's sexual orientation?

Data Analysis

To investigate the research questions, 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted. An initial interview was held, which served as the pilot for subsequent interviews. Results from the pilot interview did not yield modifications. Additionally, three of the interviews were not included in the data analyses process; two video recordings were lost due to technical difficulties, and one participant, who served as the pilot interview, has lived most recently in a rural area, but did not grow up or come out in a rural area. Although the pilot interview included useful information about the individual's recent experiences living in a rural area as a lesbian, the influence of rural culture on her upbringing was lacking, thus it was not included in the final analyses. A total of 11 interviews were used in the final analysis process.

After the pilot interview was completed, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the participants' experiences. In grounded theory, saturation is met when new participants fail to contribute new information (Fassinger, 2005). Typically, saturation is achieved using between 8 – 15 participants (Polkinghorne, 2005). In this study, saturation was achieved after 11 interviews were completed and new participants did not provide novel information or responses.

Upon completion of the semi-structured interviews, the video recordings of the interviews were transcribed by the researcher in the order in which they were conducted. Next, initial coding of the interviews began. First, the researcher utilized line-by-line coding to determine meaning units in response to each question. After initial meaning units were established, the researcher, using a comparative method, reanalyzed participant responses using an incident-by-incident approach to compare each participant's experiences with the others. After meaning units were established through

incident-by-incident coding, the process of focused coding began. The meaning units which were included in generation of focused codes were those in which three or more participants described a similar experience. Of the remaining meaning units, those that were similar were grouped into larger categories. The researcher continued the process of comparing the data upon itself and organizing into categories over many phases. Eventually, when it was determined that the categories could no longer be combined or subsumed into larger categories, data analysis ceased.

Lastly, the analysis team consisted of the researcher and dissertation committee chair. The researcher was responsible for data analysis and coding, while the dissertation committee chair acted as an auditor to guarantee credibility and trustworthiness.

Credibility & Trustworthiness

Considering the process of developing themes emergent from the data, it is imperative that qualitative researchers establish processes to ensure credibility and trustworthiness. Thus, in this study, outside auditing, memo writing, and participant feedback of final analyses were utilized to ensure objective analysis. Although there are no specific requirements for the process of auditing (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), many qualitative investigators include this component in their studies (Fassinger, 2005). Fassinger notes that auditing is primarily used in two ways, through peer debriefing and inquiry auditing. In peer debriefing, the researchers' coding, categorization, and theorization are examined. Inquiry auditing involves examination of the overall process and substantive theory to ensure the study has followed acceptable procedures (Fassinger). The dissertation committee chair, who has experience with qualitative dissertations, conducted peer debriefing and inquiry auditing. Additionally, the researcher

utilized memo writing, which captured all decisions made during the research process, including how data was collected and analyzed. Lastly, trustworthiness was addressed through participant feedback after data collection and synthesis. Participant responses were summarized and sent to all participants via email. Interviewees were given two weeks to provide feedback on the researcher's interpretation of their responses and to indicate whether the summarization and analysis of the data accurately reflects their experiences. The researcher received feedback from three participants, all of whom agreed with the interpretation of the results. Additionally, P9 stated that although she did not directly discuss censoring information during the interview, she agreed with the theme and provided an example of this from her own life.

Participant Characteristics

Participants in the current study included 11 self-identified lesbians between the ages of 21 and 56 (see Table 1). Nine of the participants identified as Caucasian and two were African American. Six participants described their socioeconomic status (SES) as lower middle or working class, four characterized themselves as middle class, and one identified in upper middle class. All participants had at least a high school diploma. Ages at disclosure varied between 16 years of age and 49. Five participants were currently partnered at the time of the interview. Lastly, one participant identified as Atheist, three as Christian, one as Buddhist, and the remaining six did not claim a current religious affiliation.

Six participants came out during adolescence (i.e. between ages 16 and 22) and the remaining five came out in adulthood (i.e. between ages 29 and 49). Additionally, some participants reported coming out to parents and siblings at different times. For

example, P11 came out to her sister approximately 10 years before coming out to her parents. Additionally, seven participants were from rural and mixed-rural counties on the east coast, two participants were from the Midwest, one participant was from Appalachia, and one participant lived in both the Appalachian region and east coast.

Grounded Theory

Participant responses were analyzed using grounded theory, which is considered to be the "market leader," and is one of the most established and respected methods of conducting qualitative research in a number of social science disciplines (Fassinger, 2005; Ponterotto, 2005). Grounded theory was chosen specifically for this research study because of the discovery and exploratory-oriented nature (Ponterotto). This method allowed the researcher to create a theory grounded in the lived experiences of the participants (Fassinger, 2005). Additionally, considering the complexity of coming out and the lack of attention paid to this topic, grounded theory was chosen to explore the unique experiences of rural lesbians, and to describe, understand, and clarify their experiences (Polkinghorne, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Grounded theory is achieved through coding of data and creating theories based on participants' responses. Coding in grounded theory refers to "naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43). The process of coding involves constant comparison of the data in which existing data is compared to newly collected data to discover similarities and differences (Charmaz). The purpose is to interpret and construct meaning from the narrative data collected in the interview and create a theoretical statement about the situation under investigation (Fassinger, 2005).

Initial Coding

Grounded theory is characterized by two major phases of coding: (1) initial coding, in which each line, word, or segment of data is named; and (2) focused coding (Charmaz, 2006). During initial coding, the transcribed data can be analyzed word-by-word, line-by-line, paragraph-by-paragraph, or incident-by-incident to develop meaning units (Charmaz; Fassinger, 2005). Meaning units are created when the participants' responses are broken down into themes; these themes are then labeled and compared to other meaning units to create overarching categories (Charmaz; Fassinger). The researcher in this study first utilized line-by-line coding to develop meaning units for each response. Then, using the comparative method of analysis, the researcher used incident-by-incident coding to compare each participant's experience with others' descriptions. The process of initial coding allowed the researcher to search for theoretical directions to investigate in later data collection and analysis (Charmaz).

For example, when asked how she has adjusted her relationships with family members over time, one participant stated, "Um, boy that's a good question. I don't really know (laughs). I think the responsibility, I feel like the responsibility has fallen on me to bring it up, and do, what I call, temperature checks. It's all about communication, right? Even if it's hard" (P3). The meaning unit of this response was "Feeling Responsible for Communication." After meaning units were derived from each response, similar meaning units were grouped across all interviews, which were then combined into groups, and then larger, overarching categories. For example, "Feeling Responsible for Communication" was then grouped with other similar meaning units, including, "Less Talking About Feelings," "Coming Out and Continuing Discussions," "Changes in

Communication," "Censoring Information," "Unable to Talk About Partners," Educating Others," and "Indirect Communication." From these meaning units, the category "Communication" was created. The researcher identified 17 categories that emerged from the meaning units across all interviews. The themes discovered are discussed below in more detail. Quotations are also included to provide further illustration. Additionally, the organization of meaning units into larger themes and categories will be discussed later in this chapter.

Precipitant to Coming Out. Seven of the eleven participants described either being pushed out of the closet or outed to family members. In general, very few participants described coming out for the sake of coming out, but instead, generally came out after a significant event occurred, such as a break up or when a family member accidentally discovered their sexual orientation. Participant 7 described how she came out to her sister after her 20-year relationship ended,

> Just under complete desperation, because I was living out of the house and, you know, basically just called her up and said, 'Can I come down to stay for awhile?' and she's like, 'What the heck's wrong with you (laughs)?' But at that point, I had to tell her and it was probably the one and only time she saw me shed a few tears type scenario. But um, so that was probably really quite uncomfortable, you know, for her. (P7)

Another individual, P6, described her experience of reluctantly coming out. She stated,

> Well um, I believe that my mom found a letter from my girlfriend at the time and she confronted me about it and said something like, 'This relationships is not what it should be is it?' or something like that. And so then, you know, I came out to

them and I was like 'No, you're right this is what it is…' So that was how it happened. And then my mom was like, 'I've got to tell your father,' and that's kind of how it all ensued and she was very upset and that's what happened. (P6)

One participant recounted the experience of having been maliciously outed. In describing her experience, she stated, "I was actually outed to my family. Uh I have suspicion of who did it, but they sent an anonymous email to my mother saying that I was in a lesbian relationship and that she should end it before I like tarnish my reputation."

For these participants, coming out was generally a process that the individual did not feel prepared for, or did not plan on engaging in at the time. P2 captured this experience when describing how her sexual orientation "fell out" during a conversation with her parents. She stated the following,

Um I mean I guess when I was 22, there were some other issues happening, and really when I came out it all just, it was all just kind of pouring out, and that just kind of fell out as an afterthought as I was talking about these other things. And I don't think my parents even realized what I had said because they were so concerned about other things and uh to them it was just an afterthought as well um until probably 2 or 3 weeks later my dad called me and was like, 'Wait, did you say this?' (laughs) and I was like, 'Did I? Shit' (laughs). (P2)

In general, it seemed that many of the participants did not plan to disclose their sexual orientation at the moment the conversation occurred; rather it was discovered or came out as a result of a significant event.

Temporary disruption of family homeostasis. Seven participants noted a temporary disruption in the family's homeostasis after they come out. Generally,

participants described a period of time in which the family's usual style of closeness experienced a significant rupture; however, eventually, the families reunited and resumed a sense of normalcy. Over time, each family made adjustments and modifications in their relationships which will be more thoroughly discussed in later meaning units.

In response to her mother receiving the anonymous email which outed her, P11 described her family's disruption in homeostasis by stating, "I called my mother, er, my mother called me, and before she even said anything, I said 'It's true,' and she said, 'End it or I'm done' and she hung up on me. And so she basically like disowned me for about 6 months." Another participant, P1, also reported a similar situation in which tension ensued in her family for quite a while after coming out. She mentioned, "But yea, so it kind of led to me and my family not getting along at all for a couple years. I wouldn't tell them I loved them for like a year. They tried to tell me and I was like, 'Nah, I don't feel like you love me so I'm not going to say it back.' So we kind of didn't get along for a long time. It was pretty intense."

Participant 6 also talked about the rupture in her family's homeostasis as an unfortunate but necessary process during her identity development. She responded,

> But anyway, so I think at the time I felt like, (a) I had a support group that did not include my parents, that I couldn't rely on my parents and, in fact, I probably had to get away from them in order to uh, forge this new identity that I had just found. And um I think I felt like I just wanted to leave as soon as I possibly could. So that's how I felt at the time, and I also didn't communicate with my parents at all for maybe two years. Um, so because I think I was just very hurt, um hurt by it, and I just felt like okay, if you're going to reject me to such a great degree, then

> I'll reject you. And I'll just, and maybe it's a way of trying to come to terms with all this new information that your brain is trying to cope with and you're trying to come to your emotional kind of, conclusions about it." (P6)

None of the participants reported disruption of the family's normal processes for more than a few years.

Varying reactions. Another experience many participants shared is receiving varying reactions from family members, even within their immediate family. For example, many participants reported positive responses from siblings and negative reactions from parents, or approval and acceptance from one sibling and disapproval from other siblings, as well as situations in which one parent was quite accepting and the other was not. Consider P11's experience with her sisters and parents,

> My dad was great and my oldest sister was great too, like you know they were just there for me. Uh [the middle sister], I didn't know this until like this past year, she actually took it really hard um and not from a, you know, I feel bad because, you know, like my mother is being an idiot kind of deal, but from the oh my god she's going to go to hell point of view and I didn't realize that until my dad told me that he had spoken with her and actually got very mad at her for not being more supportive and understanding. Um so my middle sister took it very hard. She didn't let me know that. Um I never felt that in any way and I actually thought she had taken it much better than she did but apparently that's because my dad had spoken to her and said, look you need to, you need to be there. And uh, my mother obviously did not take it well. (P11)

P10 also reported varying reactions in her family, particularly based on generation.

> Um my cousins, since I'm the oldest and they're a younger generation, but they talk about it and they're open. Like we were in the kitchen, everybody is everywhere, and they're like, 'So who you datin' [P10]?' and like I talk to them and tell them things, so they're just open. It's my mom's side, the children of the siblings, but I think that's the difference in the generation. They're like, '[P10], you live so great! The family is not in your business.' I was like, 'I don't let them in to too much,' they're like 'that is so great, you're just doing you and you're fine' and I was like it's really interesting to see their perspective of it. They see it as a power and I um didn't necessarily know that, but it's good. It's really good. Now the cousins on the other side, I talk to them but I didn't grow up with them. We're not as close, um, so we don't really talk as much and if we do it's about the kids, but the other ones, we're more open. (P10)

Most participants did not experience a unified response with all family members having similar reactions.

Acceptance of unacceptance. Many participants also demonstrated understanding for why family members may not understand or approve of their sexual orientation or have negative reactions to their coming out. In general, many participants talked about the context in which their family members existed, to frame why they may have been unsupportive at times. Take P6 for example; as previously described, she experienced a period in which she completely cut off contact with her parents for approximately two years after coming out. She described feeling quite hurt by their strong reactions initially and stated,

> But um, now, now looking back, you just have greater compassion for my parents. They were definitely older than other people's parents. I was born, you know my dad was in his 40's and so was my mom when I was born, so and they're from a very different era. My dad was in WWII. They had very different ways. My mom's church had a very, you know, it was Church of Christ, it was a very fundamentalist kind of place to be, so that was her guidance on the issue. But then you know years later, um, and I didn't trust my parents, but I wanted to be with them, I missed them, but I just wasn't sure like I didn't feel comfortable. But years later, my sister said, you know one day, um my mom… this is kind of emotional (tears up), yea, but anyway, one day my mom was talking about the time we had not been together and she said, you know it's that saying if something belongs to you let it go, and she said that about me, that they had to let me go but then I came back, and so that was very meaningful to me. (P6)

Participant 8 also described framing the context in which her father made a negative comment about a transgendered coworker. She reported,

> I just, I guess, just try to, I guess I'm a bit more understanding that people are ignorant of certain different kinds of individuals out there and also just the fact that our society has changed a lot from when they were growing up and just being more understanding that they're getting used to seeing more diverse people out there and being more open about being out in the public and stuff like that. So when they say dumb things like that, they don't, I don't think when my dad said the thing about the transgender coworker, and well he also explained a few things about the person where the person wasn't necessarily engaging in professional

> behavior or professional attire or something like that, so I think part of that might have affected his demeanor towards the transgender community. But I figure that context and just his unfamiliarity with more than one transgender person, that that affected that kind of, those kinds of comments that he made. So I guess I'm just a bit more understanding because well really the comments or any kind of negativity that, well I think that's the only one that I really remember, I mean that's really minimal compared to other individuals who deal with a lot worse. (P8)

Some participants described their family members' disapproval as based on tensions with Christianity. Six participants described themselves as coming from religious families; furthermore, four participants explained that their family members had a hard time accepting their sexuality because of conflict with the church and their religious beliefs. Participant 1 described her family as concerned about her sexual orientation and stated, "I think it was mostly an image thing and religion thing, you know. They were more concerned about my soul."

For many individuals, they considered the context, particularly the rural environment, as having a significant influence on their disapproving or negative reactions.

Femininity and image in rural areas. Three participants also reported struggling with their family over not appearing to be feminine enough, which seemed to be intertwined with disapproving family members' concerns about their image in their small community. In talking about her relationship with an aunt, P1 reported, "Her and my mom kind of team up on me, 'You need to wear makeup' you know, that whole thing."

Later, when describing the impact of rurality on her relationships with family members, P1 mentioned,

> Um back to my mom with the whole, I think image thing, I think that bothered her a lot. Um how would people think of her because I'm gay? Or how would they think of me? If we're ever at the mall ever and someone's awkwardly staring at me my mom gets very defensive but then she hates it. I'm like, it doesn't make any sense, mom. But uh yea I would say that for the most part, my mom is very concerned with her image. I think that's a Southern, little bit of an Appalachian thing.... But yea, really just that image thing, I think that's the most hard thing with them to deal with. (P1)

Participant 11 also embodied the intersection between image and rurality with the following statement,

> But I would say that that is a huge reason why my mother was totally devastated is because how will it look to so and so? And it's just like, that, like I just cut my hair like 6 months ago or something and I told all my family. I asked their opinion for some reason, but I'm just one of those people who ask a ton of opinions from everyone um and they all told me don't do it. Like every single one of them. My sisters were like, eh do it if you want to. And my middle sister finally was like championing for me and was like, "Go do it. Cut your hair you're 26 years old, oh my gosh!" um but like it was all because of this image that I'm supposed to upkeep of being super feminine and you know, being straight. I'm supposed to look straight because you know that's what they want me to look like and it's totally like ridiculous. Um my mother, I remember the conversation you know

about my hair cut and it was just like she was about to go somewhere where she should not go (smiles) but I could tell my sister was with her giving her the stare down because she went and started going and then she quickly made a U-turn and it was just like, yea. It's just all about this appearance you know and it's just like, I'm freaking 26 years old, I'm getting my Ph.D., I am successful, like I'm going to cut my freaking hair (laughs). Um so it was just, it's kind of ridiculous how people are so judgmental um and I mean, it's not just about haircuts but it's you know, about everything. So, I would say that is a huge part of being in a rural community is that everybody cares about everybody else's business. (P11)

Lastly, P9, reported numerous struggles with her family over femininity. It should be noted that P9's experiences are particularly unique in that, at the time of the interview, she was considering transitioning from female to male. She reported,

> But the biggest struggles that I had growing up was is that, my sister was older than me. She was very feminine: loved the dresses, frillier the better. Any of the female issues she was like, I'm okay with it. Looking back I can see why I wasn't okay with it. But my mom and I were constantly struggling with my clothes to where I would run around without a shirt on outside, you know stuff like that, she was always having to reign me back in. I was so different from my sister in those kinds of things. So those kinds of battles went on and got worse as I got older. Um even today, even as much as she knows about me, maybe she won't now since 2 weeks ago when I told her what I'm planning next, but even this past Christmas, she even tried, she tried oh I know, she tried to give me some very feminine underwear. I'm like, "Mom, really?" Haven't been there, not going to be

there, she keeps trying. I'm 55, she's 85, when is it going to stop (laughs)? It's not going to stop. She's going to keep trying I guess. So it's that kind of thing for her, still trying to figure out I guess as a mother, did she do something wrong? I don't know how she's feeling but I'm just saying she keeps trying to somehow do something to make me more feminine. Uh so those battles have been uncomfortable, you know that type of thing… We just battled about things. My mom was very, she was adamant that I was going to be feminine that's where we kept bouncing our heads. Uh I mean, even I can remember things written in your head. Uh the first time she demanded that I finally wear a bra. I can just remember those kinds of battles going on, just crying (laughing) I didn't want to wear a bra. Um so I mean it had to be just as tough on her I'm sure… Um I don't remember not being able to do things I wanted to do, except be more like a boy, but we had those kind of fights. (P9)

Within the theme of concerns over image, it appeared that one's family generally demonstrated concern about the participants not appearing feminine enough or worry about how others in the community would perceive them and their family after the individual came out.

Less talking about feelings. One common response among participants was a noticeable lack of conversations about one's personal issues or feelings in the home that existed within a loving and caring household. A few participants described home environments in which one simply did not discuss personal feelings or display intense emotions in the home. For example, P6 stated,

> So, people who have visited my house said my house was very quiet. We did not, we really don't talk about personal things, and not emotional, like you would not see someone crying in my house if they were upset. Um, so very damp, and very quiet, very silent, and kind of anxiety producing, even though there was a lot of caring between us. (P6)

P3 also reported a similar experience and stated,

> We talked a lot about, you know, academic things, educational things, stuff like that. Um we did a lot of reading. We talked about social issues a lot, maybe less talking about feelings. Um both my parents come from Midwestern backgrounds so there's sort of a stoic Midwestern 'We're not going to talk about this.' But if anybody was ever seriously concerned about something obviously the expectation was that you could talk about it. (P3)

P9 also reflected similar experiences as P5 and P3 and mentioned, "We just didn't talk about stuff and the few times I brought stuff up when I was little, it didn't work out well. That was hard." Lastly, P7 also reported that her household's conversations rarely included discussions about feelings. She stated, "Again never really talking about any type of intimate personal issues, and [that] really hasn't changed, well maybe a little bit now that, after my dad passed you know, a little bit more um communication with my mother, but still she doesn't, she doesn't know [her sexual orientation]."

The participants who described these types of home environments felt very strongly that they came from loving, warm households in which they felt connected to their family members, but this system existed in such a way that discussions about personal feelings did not occur.

Coming out and continued discussion. Another theme discovered in the meaning units surrounded a few participants having continued, positive discussions with family members about their sexual orientation and current partnerships. For example, P2 noted that she and her immediate family have had discussions about her preferences for whom her parents inform of her sexual orientation, as well as how she can assist them on navigating the process together. She stated,

> Um and in general I've told them if they do have any questions just ask, and uh I would prefer not to be outed uh to people I don't know and things like that or if they think it's important for me to be out to somebody you know just ask me and I'll tell them what to say (laughs). So uh in general it's actually opened up a lot of communication um and also consideration for what they talk about, what they talk about me you know to their acquaintances. Um I think in general, compared to a lot of my friends' parents I think they've adjusted really well. (P2)

Another participant, P3, reported numerous incidents in which she has had discussions with her parents about her current partners. Lastly, P11 reported positive experiences with her father specifically because of his interest in her relationships. In discussing their relationship in general, she stated, "He's the only one in my family who like asks me every time we talk if I'm dating anyone or you know something like that, so it's nice to have someone in my family who is actually, like wanting to know about that part of my life."

In general, however, these participants made up a minority of the sample. Most participants experienced significant changes in communication styles, which essentially eliminated conversations about their sexual orientation, including current partners or

future plans (i.e. marriage/commitment, moving in together, etc.). Themes that demonstrate changing communication patterns are discussed below.

Changing communication patterns. A core theme across most participant responses included changes in communication patterns after coming out. Many participants described close relationships with family members in which they felt like they could tell a parent or a sibling anything; however, after coming out, many participants reported feeling unable to be open and honest with their parents. Some participants reported initial negative reactions from family members (P6), which contributed to their lack of willingness to share information about their sexual orientation, while other participants reported not wanting to share that part of their life because of the uncertainty of how their family members might respond upon learning their sexual orientation (P7). Additionally, a minority of participants described the changes in communication in positive terms. For example, P11 and P2 reported increases in communication with their parents and/or siblings after coming out. Furthermore, regardless of the specific reason or outcome, five participants described changes that occurred in how they communicated with their family members after coming out.

After learning that P6 was in a relationship with a woman, her father stated, "I don't ever want to talk about this ever again." Since their conversation occurred a few decades ago, she reported that they have not had one conversation about her sexual orientation. On the other hand, to demonstrate positive changes in communication, P2, in discussing her current relationships with her father and brother, included increased communication as a factor in their improved relationships. She stated, "Um our relationship [with her brother] has evolved for the better for sure. And uh even with my

dad as well. We didn't used to talk all that much when I growing up but um I think we understand each other a lot better now."

Ways in which communication changed are detailed in subsequent themes.

Censoring information. For some participants, changes in communication patterns generally included censoring or refraining from informing their parents/siblings about issues, decisions, or situations involving their partners. P1 discussed the burden of intentionally keeping information from her parents and stated, "Um but I would say just general communication like that, like talking about life decisions and plans and kind of have to hide it and it's like I'd rather just tell you what's going on um because it makes it easier on me too." P5 reported a more global process of censoring information from her mother, to include not only information about partners but also activities she engages in. She reported, "like me with the censoring of information, I kind of developed that after I came to college. Um that wasn't the case in high school and like middle school, but like coming into college and realizing there was stuff that was going to cause a reaction, and it's not just, you know, stuff about my personal life, it's other things that I do that I don't really tell them about."

Included in some participants' responses was an inability to talk about current partners, either because their family members are unaccepting or because they are not out to particular individuals. For example, as mentioned earlier, P6's father specifically requested that conversations about her sexual orientation never be brought up again after their initial conversation. For others, like P7, there is some desire to include family members in the goings-on of their relationships, but an apparent lack of ability. P7 stated, "I mean if the door was open, I would love to you know talk more about them." Another,

P10, also described having intentionally not introduced her current partner to her family members because she is unsure how they will respond.

In the credibility check, P11 added that while she didn't discuss censoring information in our initial interview, she very much identified with this theme and stated,

> When I was first outed, I had a really hard time discussing details of my relationships with my family. I felt like I didn't know how much detail they wanted to know about my life and my partner, so I usually chose to exclude many details until they asked to avoid conflict or awkwardness. It has gotten much easier in the last year or two because I decided that I want to make it more comfortable to talk with my family (mother and sister in particular) and came out to all my friends. It's still really hard to discuss difficulties in my relationships with my mother because I use to feel like she was looking for every possible reason that I shouldn't be with a woman. But, I'm getting better about being open with all of my immediate family. It just took me/us a long time to get there. In general, members of my immediate family talk a lot, so it's nice to be able to talk about my life (all parts of it) with all of them. But, my discomfort immediately after being outed is probably because I was outed and didn't feel comfortable talking about homosexuality at a time when I was still figuring everything out. (P11)

Unsurprisingly, the participants who reported censoring information about their current partners or life plans tended to have or anticipate more negative reactions from family members. It appeared that withholding information and censoring served as a

mechanism to decrease tension with family members and limit opportunities for conflict, in order words, figuring out new ways to maintain the family's homeostasis.

Responsible for conversations about sexual orientation. Three participants also reported feeling the burden of being responsible for facilitating conversations about their sexual orientation or relationships. In describing her current relationship with her sister, the only person in her family to whom she is out, P7 stated,

> just because you come out to family or friends doesn't mean that your job's over, meaning as with my sister and brother-in-law, even during the time that I was getting over that just horrific pain, never has [it] been brought up again so, it's pretty much back in the closet. Now my uncle who's not around, he has a son who came out to the family and he's gay but yea it's not, it's not brought up. So it exists but no it doesn't exist. (P7)

Later, P7 discussed feeling responsible for continuing conversations about her sexual orientation with family members and reported the following,

> So yea, possibly kind of attempted it several times but again, maybe I too dropped the ball as the person I saw for 2 years after that saying, just because, and it's a little bit different scenario, but just because I came out doesn't mean my job is done. And I would say then yea, I dropped the ball by not you know I don't want to say keep throw it in their face with that, but just to kind of remind them that um yea, that 20 years wasn't just a little let's try this out for kicks, you know. It wasn't a phase. But I don't think that they know how to communicate about those kind of things. (P7)

Additionally, P3 also reported similar feelings to P7. She stated, "I think the responsibility, I feel like the responsibility has fallen on me to bring it up, and do, what I call, temperature checks. It's all about communication, right? Even if it's hard."

For some participants, it appeared that they felt the need to continue having conversations with their family members about their sexual orientation.

Educating others. Another common meaning unit among participants was a desire to educate family members about the LGBT community. Five participants reported experiences in which they felt frustrated with their family and wanted to educate them on aspects of the LGBT community. For example, P1 reported numerous experiences in which her mother demonstrated lack of understanding about various aspects of her identity as a lesbian. She stated,

> It's just kind of, they don't understand it for the most part and um, I don't know. They think I'm just going through a phase and or I want to be a boy, and I'm like no (laughs) it's not really what it is really. You know they think my drag queen roommate wants to be a girl, and I'm like no, just learn. Just go on Google, you'll learn everything. (P1)

Additionally, in response to their lack of understanding about the LGBT community, P1 expressed desire to educate her family members but feeling frustrated at their response. Later she added,

> Um I try, I really just want to educate my family more than anything especially after coming here [to university]. Um that's why I really, one of the reasons I made my drag documentary for my class was because my parents do not understand it at all and I was like, they don't understand it, I wonder how many

other people don't? So it's more like I'd like to educate them but they won't let me. So it's like they just refuse to talk about it versus I could tell you what it is and you could understand it but they don't want to hear it. (P1)

In response to the question about how her relationship has changed with her brother since coming out, P3 mentioned,

> um, you know, he's very um politically conservative, so he's got issues with um politics around it, and because it seems like a lot of gays and lesbians are more liberal, he has this Fox News mentality that we, we have an agenda that we're trying to push down people's throats and so I've had to do some education/arguing (laughs) on that. (P3)

These participants demonstrated a desire to educate their family as a way to increase their understanding and attempt to dispel any myths surrounding one's lesbian identity.

Imply sexual orientation without being direct. Another common theme that multiple participants described was implying their sexual orientation or relationship status without directly stating it. Some participants reported implying information in person, while others may not have come out to certain family members, but don't censor information on social media. As an example of implying sexual orientation, P8 reported,

> I was in a serious relationship and my dad's sister more or less found out because she was showing me some houses and the former girlfriend was with me and we kind of was holding hands or something in the back seat of her car and I think she saw it. So that was kind of that way. So yea, I'm more of a subtle person instead of being really direct or kind of observing people's reactions or listening for

comments about that sort of thing before deciding on being more direct and coming out and stuff. (P8)

Additionally, in talking about family members to whom she has come out, P2 stated, "But uh, among the older adults, um, I don't think, I would be surprised if they didn't know, but I haven't necessarily been forward too about it, um, because it's kind of hard to miss with me on the Internet these days (laughs)." Participant 1 also demonstrated how she indirectly communicates information to her mother. She stated, "Um, I don't know. I guess when I first started college I really lied all the time and now I've become, I try to hint to my mom what's going on, imply it anyway."

It appeared that for some (P8), implying one's sexual orientation is congruent with their typical style of interaction; however, for others, such as P1, implication seemed to represent the desire to have her parents, specifically her mother, involved in her life, but feeling as though she cannot talk freely about her sexual orientation.

Lack of LGB support. All participants reported feeling some degree of lack of LGB-specific support, which subsequently impacted their coming out process in a variety of ways. Some participants reported that little exposure to other LGB made it more difficult for them to realize they were lesbians, while others reported feeling isolated in their community. A few participants reported having close friends who came out, or distantly knew of LGB community members, but still felt like they did not have positive LGB role models to which they could look for support. Other participants reported that the lack of support in their family caused them to look elsewhere and create families of choice, with whom they could be open about their sexual orientation and issues with partners or dating.

Some participants reported little exposure to other LGB in their rural communities, which subsequently impacted the development of their sexual orientation. For example, P4 captured this struggle and stated, **"**Um and I think it's harder, I think it's harder to consider that it could be a thing that's true of you, you know even if it's true of like, you know, whatever that person in the news or you know those people in New York City, it can't actually be true of you because you live in such a small area you're not exposed to as much diversity." Participant 7 also discussed the interaction between rural environment and identity development. She mentioned,

> I don't know if growing up in a more rural setting possibly adds more confusion to some individuals because they don't have that much interaction with others… As far as the rural, you know sometimes I would be concerned as far as people feel more alienated because there aren't as many people to talk to or to realize that 'Hey I'm not the only person on this planet that is feeling this way. Something must be wrong with me,' um would be my only thought towards that. (P7)

Participant 8 described the impact of the rural environment specifically on her coming out process,

> I'd say, it could be, it might be because of growing up in a rural area that that might have affected why I waited forever, well not forever, but waited until I was 29 to come out or that I was too afraid to be different or too afraid to accept something like that about myself… I think it's entirely possible that growing up in a rural area, but also growing up at the time that I grew up, also affected my ability to or how quickly or the way that I finally came out to myself. (P8)

Participant 9 discussed the rural component and lack of exposure, as well as introduced a potential generational factor on her coming out process. She reported the following:

> Well, this area has grown so much. Um, you know I wish we had the knowledge um the language when I was younger because most of the women that I played sports with, I shouldn't say most of them, quite a few of us were lesbians, but we didn't know it. I mean, it wasn't talked about, you know now, but while we were kids going through things, and today I think some of those kids might be more, vocabulary, you know savvy to, be able to say to be able to talk about it, we weren't…. Um it's um, but growing up I wish we had a better language so that maybe I would have realized. (P9)

P7 also reported a similar experience. When asked if she had LGB role models growing up, she replied,

> No, um, I mean I did what one thought was to be expected. I mean I dated guys. Um nothing ever came of that or was serious. In fact my mother would say when I was in high school, "Why don't you just go out with a guy like, you know, once or twice," and it's like, "I don't know (laughs). I got bored." Uh but never did that word ever even remotely come up as part of a discussion, uh. No, or nor did I ever think that you know, "It's like, my gosh, am I gay?" um, had the typical slight crush on the gym teacher scenario, but still, I guess it was there. But it was never, the word wasn't associated with that feeling. Yea, I always thought that was sort of odd. (P7)

Additionally included in having little exposure to other LGB, ten of the participants reported having no role models for coming out. Though some of the participants knew of people in their community who were living openly, they did not identify anyone as a specific role model for coming out.

Additionally, as reflected in previous literature (Boulden, 2001; D'Augelli & Hart, 1987; McCarthy, 2000), difficulty finding support in rural areas was also mentioned by the participants of this study. They described LGB-specific support as existing, yet hard to access when they needed it. For example, when asked if there was anything else she would like to add to the interview, P2 mentioned,

> Um be careful who you talk to. There are support systems out there if you seek them and the people that you'll find in uh these rural support systems are very extraordinary people. Very brave, uh especially among the older people who came from a much less accepting time. There is so much that's changed even from when I was 17 to where we are now. I mean I can't believe this has happened in my own lifetime, uh in a small portion of my lifetime really. Um but the people are out there to support you and if anything you may be surprised by the level of support that you find. It definitely is easy to feel isolated um and people feel isolated for any variety of reasons anyway, but um organizations like PFLAG and GLAD um and GLISTEN and then even other local organizations that are all there um and once you find them it can be the most incredible support system. They won't force you to come out. Um they will respect you, they will respect your need for the right time, and uh they've all been through it before, and they're there to help. (P2)

Participant 2 also elaborated on the isolation experienced by her parents after she came out, and added,

> I definitely feel like they also feel isolated um because it's not like, I have some gay friends most of which are from campus and everybody that's from campus is from elsewhere, so it's not like they really have parents to get together with to talk about a lot of these things. Um and they've been kind of shy about uh going to PFLAG meetings and things like that because it's a lot of um people from campus uh and they didn't want to overlap, especially my dad, he didn't want to overlap his professional and private life, so. I mean even though in general he's okay with the situation um there's a level of isolation that both my parents experience just not having you know parents of other young queer people to talk to. (P2)

Another participant, P3, described her surprise when attending a local concert and recognizing that a lesbian community existed in her area. She stated,

> So I guess in the community, you know what was funny, going to that Indigo Girls concert there in [town], I'm right there across the street and we looked around and it was part of the meetup group, there were several people there from that. But it was wall-to-wall lesbians. And then we looked up and there were two women holding hands. And we looked at each other and went, 'In [the town]? Really?' (laughs) And so that kind of raised my awareness that it's here, it's everywhere, it's just not out. And uh the person that I came out with is a good friend who's also a hospice nurse. That's how I met her. She was my husband's hospice nurse, so we had this strong bond and relationship before I came out to her. She said, 'Well [P3] there's lesbians all over [the] county.' She goes to their

homes. And I said, 'Really?' So my relationship to the community is baffling at best. I think that meetup group really did wonders for bringing everyone out. (P3)

Participant 9 also described feeling isolated at times due to lack of exposure to other lesbians, particularly other lesbians who identify as more masculine. She responded to the question about existence of role models with the following:

> Um but around role models [shakes head no]. It's hard, I mean it's really hard. So I do follow women's basketball a whole lot, college women's basketball. And I finally started going to the final four tournaments. My first one I think was in 1990, and at those tournaments there are so many people like me (laughs). Dressed like me. Women wearing men's clothes or very masculine, and it's like, 'Wow. Cool…' You're going, 'Yeah there's a lot of people like me out here…' but you go to those things and you go, 'Oh, man. It's not just me.' Um so it took a while for those kind of, for me to be aware that those kinds of things existed, um. You go to any women's basketball game you're going to see a lot of lesbians there (laughs). Really! You watch it on TV, every once in a while when they flash through the audience you'll see, yea they're all lesbians around (laughs). (P9)

When talking about her experiences as a college student, P9 stated, "I didn't know anybody else was around that was like me. You're isolated. You feel something's wrong with you. Don't tell anybody. Dirty." When asked if there was anything else P7 would like to add at the end of our interview, she responded, "As far as the rural, you know sometimes I would be concerned as far as people feel more alienated because there aren't as many people to talk to or to realize that 'Hey I'm not the only person on this planet

that is feeling this way. Something must be wrong with me,' um would be my only thought towards that."

The experiences of the participants in this study were congruent with previous research findings on rural-specific environmental challenges, such as feeling isolated and having difficulty finding LGB-specific support. Additionally, some participants described this lack of support as impacting their sexual orientation and the coming out process, causing them to recognize their identity later.

Not okay to be gay. Three participants reported receiving the message from their community that it's not okay to be gay. These participants described experiences in which they received messages from their rural environment that indicated that being gay was wrong, unacceptable, or not an option. Not surprisingly, these participants also described the "conservative" rural environment as a significant factor on why they received this message from the community. Each participant described how this message was communicated from their community or environment. For example, P11 stated,

> I would say that is probably the biggest thing, is how conservative some rural communities are. It's just like, it's hard to feel okay about yourself being gay in some rural communities. It's like you know you're going to be judged by every single person and then you've been told your entire life that it's wrong. So yea, it's really hard to be happy. (P11)

Another participant described the impact of her community as indicating a negative climate towards gays, which was in stark contrast to her family's overwhelmingly positive response. She stated,

> I think that growing up in a conservative rural area definitely made me more reluctant to consider the idea that I could be queer. Um not because of my own family, because my own family was always really liberal, but the sort of sense that there is in this area is it's not okay. Um and so I think that I sort of just always thought, well that's not an option, I couldn't possibly be, you know, that kind of person because of the climate that there is towards queer people in this area. (P4)

Another participant also described the conservative nature of rural areas and the impact on their family. P5 described her experience as follows:

> It's really hard because there aren't a lot of, I can only think off the top of my head one gay person from my high school other than me. And so there is this um, especially in like high school I was very, very afraid of, you know, letting this out because it is a very um conservative area, uh slightly homophobic, I won't say that because I don't know for sure, but um there is this kind of bigotry there and I was afraid that something was going to happen, and I didn't know what. And I mean I've heard stories, a friend of mine got his car keyed just because he's gay. Um and so it's just um, it was a fear of mine and I think that didn't really spill over to my family because I don't think they would be as mean but the environment was very conditioning to them because they're still there. (P5)

Generally, these participants described the "conservative" rural environment as a strong influence on the negative reactions from community members, and in some cases, their family as well.

Intrapersonal struggles with religion. As previously mentioned, many participants described themselves as coming from religious households, some even having family members with fundamentalist ties. However, five participants, despite their religious upbringings, described how they struggled with formalized religion. Some participants talked about their sadness in wanting to have a relationship with a higher power, but feeling conflicted about messages received from church members and their religious community. Other participants discussed how negative interactions in their religious community eventually led to them leaving their faith all together.

P6 described her experience as follows:

> But then later in life, I kind of left Christianity. I was very turned off by it with the whole gay thing. And as you know, the right wing Christians can be just absolutely brutal, and let alone your own ways of inflicting pain on yourself and what you think God thinks about you, whether or not you believe in God or not. (P6)

Participant 9 embodied the intrapersonal struggle with religion with the following quote,

> And then I was at that conservative church one day and they had a special speaker from Scotland, and he was talking about, basically the evils of homosexuality. I was sitting there saying to myself, 'Why are you sitting here? Do you hear what this man is saying? You're in this church with 500 people and I would be willing to bet at least 80% or more of them are buying what he says wholesale. What are you doing sitting here?' So I never went back. Um I tried some other churches in [town] that I knew were very open and welcome, Unitarian. I um, I feel like

> Buddhism, I don't know, it fits more close with how I've kind of changed my thinking that we come complete. One of the things about Buddhism that I really like is that it's a journey of finding that you're really complete the way you come. And um, that, I don't know about, I would like there to be a higher spiritual being that would take care of things but I can't make sense with all the pain in the world. I just can't make sense of it. And I know because I almost, I got, I went 3 years to Colorado to study the bible, and I know they'll say it's free will that they give us free will and if we misuse it and do evil things then it's kind of our fault for misusing it. But I'm like, all powerful God could have foreseen that and why do we have such suffering? I don't, why do we have wars? Why do we do any of that? Why do I yell at people who cut me off on the road, you know? I don't know, but I guess I lean toward Buddhism and I just think of there is a God and there is a justice to be done I don't know how you pick and choose and decide who's going to, if there is a heaven or a hell, I don't know. Really, I don't know. I just don't know and I think probably if anything that's upsetting at times to me because I don't feel like I can believe it anymore and uh I think part of me would really like to be able to believe it but I can't make it fit to what I see happening in the world. (P9)

P8 described her relationship with God as something that has been important to her most of her life. While discovering her own sexual orientation she described feeling some tension from her church,

> Not from clergy or members of the congregation who know, but I do know that, I do remember that when I was in college and grad school when I was probably

> taking a tiny step in, or out, and then back into the closet, um I know I remember there were some hot issues with gay clergy members and I remember that, I remember a former pastor at the church I grew up at wrote some kind of message on the church's newsletter about not supporting that and I remember that affecting me a lot, that just being, I remember for a while I, or probably during the time I had more, um I don't know if anxiety is the right word, or fights, or disagreements, or issue bouts with my faith and stuff at that time, or I just was less interested in going to church and things like that at that time. And that I do remember being really bothered by that kind of level of narrow mindedness just because it just seemed unfair to me to be so negative about a particular community of people that at that time I didn't identify as being part of that community, maybe I did (laughs). (P8)

It appeared that, considering many of these participants' religious upbringings, having a relationship with a higher power was important, thus struggling with their beliefs was a difficult experience which involved some sadness that one could not feel accepted by their church.

Careful who you tell. A number of participants responded directly or discussed ways in which one must be careful who knows their sexual orientation in a rural area. For example, P2 directly stated, "Um be careful who you talk to." Participant 8 described multiple ways in which she is mindful of who knows her sexual orientation and how that information is conveyed, both directly and indirectly. In response to the question about how living in a rural area has impacted her life, she added,

> I'd say probably just in the way that I show being in a relationship, displaying affection, stuff like that, being comfortable with talking about hot issues and the LGBT community. Um, and also still just being careful of who knows because I mean, while I'm more comfortable with who I am, I guess I still have that, I have it in the back of my head of still not wanting to wreck any relationships or potentially wreck relationships by being out. So that might be one of those things that's in the back of my mind all the time, that [someone] growing up from a urban [area might not have], a more conservative minded area probably engrained into me. (P2)

Participant 3 also talked about avoiding religious neighbors and community members for fear of being ostracized if they learn her sexual orientation. Other participants commented on rural-specific issues which have been highlighted in previous literature, such as high visibility in their community. Participant 6 described the small town in which she grew up as "psychologically more of a fishbowl," while P5 talked about her family being "known" in the community. Demonstrating how word spreads, P5 stated the following,

> Um I definitely, because it is a small community, it's very close knit, I'm very much known because my grandfather and my father are very prominent in the community. So um when I do go home and like just because of the way I dress or the way I act, um people have definitely like whispered behind my back and I can feel it. And um I don't necessarily hear things here, I hear them through my brothers or whatever and it's kind of a generally understood thing that, you know, oh [sibling] and [sibling]'s older sister is gay. (P3)

An additional topic that came up in carefully deciding who knows one's sexual orientation was planning how and when to come out. Some participants described coming out as a calculated process, involving evaluation of others' feelings toward the LGB community, statements they had made which demonstrated non/support, observations of their behaviors, and consideration of their possible response. Participant 3 embodied this category, stating, "I really have not told anyone who I think would have a negative reaction. Um which is, I honestly have intentionally not told anyone who I think would have a negative reaction um because I need to feel okay about myself before I can start telling people who might be negative about it." Additionally, P8 shared a similar experience, while adding another factor involved in the coming out process: making decisions to come out based on frequency of interactions with family members. She stated,

> Um initially the intention was, my intentionality was to kind of just, I mean as you can see I was very selective in who I chose to come out to. So I don't think there was anything that people, I don't remember [conversations], people saying unkind things about LGBT individuals and stuff, well especially LGB. It was more people whom I probably interact with more frequently, plus, I don't know I guess, I might be more comfortable disclosing things to female members of my family compared to male members so that might've affected why I haven't directly came out to my dad's living brothers. I pretty much have the assumption that my parents have probably outed me but I guess you can't really go by assumptions so much. But my mom's other brother, I see him once a year so I figure it really doesn't matter if he knows. (P8)

One other participant, P11, also reflected P8's decisions to come out based on frequency of interactions. Furthermore, regardless of who was told, it appeared that the participants approached the situation in a careful manner, selectively choosing who to tell based on previous interactions.

A few participants also talked about victimization experiences and threats to personal safety because of their identification, or appearance, as a lesbian, thus heightening their sense of managing who knows their sexual orientation. Participants reported experiences in which they were harassed or knew others that were. P6 stated,

> I think about Matthew Shepherd and I think people, it can be really dangerous, and *Girls Don't Cry*, you know? These are rural places where they kick your ass if you don't conform. There can be that. And maybe now that happens, but even further back and just how hard it is to learn how to cope when you're alone, and I think any gay person will tell you this, how important it is to have supportive relationships. But, you also have to know how to protect yourself and how to hide, that's my 80's take on it. And I don't think young people now feel that way at all, but then, I think you have to learn how to kind of be a chameleon and show the colors that you need to show at the time for the context, but also to, you know, keep other things from blooming and showing up. Yea, that's how I would describe it. That's my feeling. (P6)

Working as a teacher, P10 shared experiences in which she was called derogatory names by both students and their parents.

> I worked at [local] High School, it' s a very different community now than it was when I was there, even 9 years ago, um, kids were always going down the hall

calling me ‘dyke.’ Kids driving, rednecks, I mean the redneck kids are, I hate to, I’m using the same thing, they’re just calling me a dyke, I [hate] using that too, but driving out of the parking lot yelling ‘dyke’ at me. And at first it just, I didn’t fight back, I just, and toward the end of my career I got to the point where they’d do something I’d stop them and say, ‘Listen this is what you call harassment.’ I’d give them that speech and say, ‘I’m asking you to stop this. If you don’t stop, I’m going to tell the principal that you’ve done it. You do it again, charges. That’s how it works,’ they’d be gone. And at least I started standing up for myself but it was, it happened a lot more than you would think with just kids, they’re kids harassing an adult. I mean I wasn’t like a 22 year old, by that time I’m up in my 30’s, you know 40’s, and I was like still getting it. So anyway, out there I was fairly scared to be too open. (P10)

P10 also talked about negative experiences she had in her workplace in which she was discriminated against, and felt like there was no protection from her administration. She mentioned,

Um how hurtful that others, I mean when I was coaching that basketball team before I gave [teaching] up, I mean even parents would get, some of my former players would come and sit behind me so that the parents couldn’t sit and hassle me while I was coaching because my AD and principal were scared to do anything, weren’t willing to do anything and when you go through that and feel like they’re doing that because I’m different, that’s the only reason they’re doing this. I haven’t acted inappropriately with a child. I haven’t yelled at their child because I wasn’t a coach that yelled. I haven’t done anything to make these

> people angry except they're angry at me because they perceive some kind of difference and don't want it. That's the only reason they have. When you go through that a couple times in your life and you know that you've been discriminated against and in our state there's not really, at least at that time there was nothing you could do about it if they fired you or wanted you to leave that job. (P10)

Participant 2, a first-generation African American whose parents immigrated to the United States from Africa described her experiences within the community and how she felt she had to change her appearance for safety reasons. She reported the following,

> I mean honestly I think I've been insulted publicly or bullied more for being queer than for being black. Um, like I've had my car vandalized uh for having an equality sticker on it, um you know just stuff like that. Um but on issues of race it's never gotten violent or anything like that. You know they're just words and you know we've all heard them before and I mean like shit just rolls off you. Um yea in terms of like uh actually feeling threatened in any way, like it's all been because of queer issues or even being with somebody who uh presents as more queer, and I did for a while in my early twenties, but you know after I got followed out of a bar um I decided that I should probably fit in a little better for my personal safety. (P2)

Participants reported that it was important to manage who is privy to one's sexual orientation in their rural community for a number of reasons, including safety concerns and fear of being ostracized. The participants also described carefully coming out to

others, when they had the opportunity as a way to maximize positive interactions and support.

Going to therapy. Some participants reported going to therapy as an attempt to cope with negative reactions from family and community members, as well as help them make sense of their sexual orientation and identity. After her parents learned of her sexual orientation in high school, P1 reported an incredibly difficult time coping. In response to the question about how she has coped with her negative experiences, she stated,

> Um I mean, it was pretty dark for a while in high school and then, I mean I had a suicide attempt at one point and all that good stuff. Um but then slowly I dealt with it with humor and then it's kind of like I addressed at some point in college. Um I probably should go back to therapy (laughs). I graduated but I have to go back, um mostly because of stress it brings it all out. But for the most part, I mean it's kind of leveled off now. (P1)

P1 also described how her family attended family therapy briefly to work through some of their struggles. P10 and P3 shared similar sentiments of utilizing mental health services to help them on their journey. P6 described how her family actually forced her to meet with a psychiatrist after they found out she was in a relationship with another woman. In describing her feelings to her family's reactions, she stated,

> Well, I actually found it to be quite traumatic. I was home from college and they took me to our family doctor (laughs) and I had to have a physical exam and the doctor said something like 'We're going to get you right,' or something and I've always hated that doctor ever since then. Um, they made me call a psychiatrist

and schedule an appointment. And you know, looking back on it, I think they thought that was the right thing to do. But um for me it was very humiliating and embarrassing and I did not want to call the psychiatrist. I thought if they wanted me to go they needed to call and make the appointment because I, you know, I didn't really think I needed it. But that's how that kind of went on. I went on to see this psychiatrist. The psychiatrist basically said, 'This is sexuality. It's not something that you can change unless you want to change,' and she said, 'Would you like for me to talk to your father?' My dad went to the appointment with me, my mom wouldn't go, and um he went in. I was not in the room. Um, I don't really know what she said. He came out. He didn't say anything. We were driving home and he said, um, 'Well the doctor said there is nothing we can do about this if you don't want to change.' He said, 'I don't ever want to talk about this ever again.' And that was it. (P6)

P9 had a particularly unique experience in that she actually attended corrective therapy for a period of time. Although her experience was not shared by other participants, it highlights the controversy surrounding sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE) (Anton, 2010).

And then I had, because of my religious upbringing I thought for sure I was going to hell if I follow through with it. Then I got involved with Campus Crusade [for Christ] and they convinced me, if I wasn't sure then, they convinced me that if I continued, I'd go to hell. No ifs, ands, or buts. You fix this part of your life or you have no chance of eternal life. So what do you want? Let me think, let me weigh: eternal life, hell. Let me see, well sure. Okay fix me. They

couldn't fix me. [They said] well you're not trying hard enough. You have not opened your heart enough and you're like going, I don't have much [more to] open, I, [they said] you are holding back something, you are holding back something but God will fix you. I'm sure that's, I mean these places that still, the kids and you hear about that, and you're like, been there done that. They didn't throw me in the back of a van but I let myself be abused by them for too many years saying they were going to fix me. I was almost going to go on staff with them, so they would make sure I was fixed in the right atmosphere, in the right frame of mind. They wouldn't have ever fixed me. So I don't know, times have changed so much thank goodness. (P9)

Eventually, P9 reported that she left that religious group and eventually had a positive experience with therapy. She stated,

Well I wasn't out, I mean even to myself. I was still at that point, involved in a very conservative church, still kind of believing that what they were telling me they could fix me, thinking maybe I needed to be fixed. So I think it was at that time that I actually went to a therapist for the first time. For some clarity you know and it think through all of that I finally decided to myself, I have tried the religious route and I have tried to be as open as I can to change, it ain't happening, let's just try to accept yourself and go forward. That probably, I talked to her was early 90's, so it was at that point that I was starting little by little to come out to more people around me, uh my friends at school that I trusted, little by little by little opening up, living more openly. (P9)

For most participants, it appeared that they were generally able to cope with negative reactions from family members; however, those that felt particularly demoralized by their family's response, tended to benefit when they made the choice to attend therapy to assist their journey.

Being true to yourself. Finally, the last meaning unit that was discovered was a desire to be true to oneself and encouragement to other LGB to do the same. Participant 1 demonstrated this point by saying,

> I mean it does scare me but you have to stick true to yourself I think. And I wish I would have known that more than what I did when I came out. It just kind of happened and I couldn't deal with it you know so, I wish, I hope that they can learn to deal with it and know that it's okay, like before your parents scream at you and blow up it's okay. I had to have a therapist tell me. I hope they learn it before it happens, so and can deal with it better. (P1)

In response to how she coped with negative experiences, P8 stated, "I guess just understanding those kinds of aspects of human kind helps me cope. Um or just rolling my eyes (laughs), or just knowing that I feel right with who I am and just knowing that I personally have felt whole and happy being who I am and being um and doing this compared to hiding something for so many years." Lastly, in response to the question if there is anything else she would like to share, P10 stated, "That you have to be true to who you are, regardless of what people think and in that way you'll be happier."

These participants demonstrated that, although community or family members may not understand, agree, or be supportive of one's sexual orientation and identification

as a lesbian, it is important to live in a way that feels authentic and allows one to be themselves.

Focused Coding

Grounded theory is characterized by two major phases of coding: (1) initial coding, in which each line, word, or segment of data is named; and (2) focused coding, in which the most frequent or significant themes from the initial phase are used to organize, synthesize, and integrate the data (Charmaz, 2006). Focused coding uses the most frequent or significant codes from the initial phase to categorize the data and create more conceptual and encompassing codes, explaining larger segments of data (Charmaz). The most significant or frequent meaning unit categories are organized into larger groups that subsume several categories (Charmaz; Fassinger). Focused coding can occur more generally though the method of constant comparison of data to data and codes to codes, or it can be achieved through axial coding. Initial coding separates the data into distinct codes, while axial coding synthesizes and explains the data by reuniting the data into a coherent whole (Charmaz; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). However, axial coding can become technical and burdensome during the analytic process (Charmaz), thus it is simply an additional tool the researcher can utilize if necessary, but is not necessary to complete focused coding. Considering the high volume of meaning unit phrases captured in the participant responses, the additional step of axial coding was omitted from the data analyses process. Furthermore, to ensure the integrity of the coding process, the auditor worked closely with this researcher to ensure the process of creating focused codes was accurate.

Of the meaning units listed in the previous section, four focused codes were developed into overarching groups: Family Processes; Family Communication; Rural Community; and Intrapersonal (See Table 3).

Selective Coding

The last step in the coding process, selective coding, involves the creation of theory in which a central category is chosen that combines all other categories (Fassinger, 2005). A short narrative of the most important aspects of the data is created, which subsumes all categories and explains their relationships to the data as a whole. Creation of theory involves simultaneous comparison of data throughout collection, coding, conceptualizing, and theorizing so that new data are compared to emerging concepts until no new categories, themes, or relationships are discovered. After no new information is discovered, properties, relationships, and constructs are defined in the form of substantive theory about the phenomena under examination (Fassinger).

After examining meaning units and focused codes, the core story which emerged through the participants' responses was, *Dynamic Interactions on Long-Term Sexual Orientation Disclosure in a Conflicted Environment*. This phrase captures the experiences of coming out to one's self, family, and their community, and the long-term management of the process. This story is also reflected in the literature (D'Augelli & Hart, 1987) which described the process of coming out as not a static event, but rather occurring over and over in many different situations and contexts.

One participant embodied this category when she described the perennial nature of choosing who to be out to, stating,

> Um but I carefully chose who I was going to be out to. And then at the church I do attend I was also very careful in choosing who to share that information with. Um, but as far as, I'd say just depending on the individuals I am probably more careful about what I share and I might be more careful about um how I interact with my partner when I've introduced her to other people or when I've had conversations that, where it makes sense for me to make reference to her. So, well I'd say yea because there's a colleague where I refer my partner as a roommate not too long ago whereas a couple other colleagues know that she is my partner and all that stuff. So I guess I'm careful of what I share to certain individuals and then I'm probably more comfortable or trusting of those whom I have come out to and it has been a positive experience. (P8)

Also within this theme was an underpinning of how one makes sense of her sexual orientation in an environment that doesn't always support this aspect of her life or allow expression of that part of her identity. One participant demonstrated this view by saying,

> but you know it's just like not being accepted and something like that, it's stuff like that, it's just like it has impacted you know the way I see people and the way like I feel about myself. Um and uh, yea it took me a long time because I was struggling you know with the whole being gay and being outed at the same time, and it was just you know, it was really a hard thing to you know come to terms with. Um but yea, I would say that is probably the biggest thing is how conservative some rural communities are. It's just like, it's hard to feel okay about yourself being gay in some rural communities, it's like you know you're going to

be judged by every single person and then you've been told your entire life that it's wrong. So yea, it's really hard to be happy. (P11)

Finally*, Dynamic Interactions on Long-Term Sexual Orientation Disclosure in a Conflicted Environment* demonstrated ways in which participants learned to balance intrapersonal acceptance and expression of their sexual orientation within their environment in a way that would reduce conflict with unaccepting individuals.

Summary

This chapter reviewed the research questions, the process of data analysis, and themes discovered in the interviews. Seventeen initial meaning units were discovered, which were grouped into four larger categories: Family Processes (Pushed Out/Outed; Disruption of Homeostasis; Varying Reactions; Acceptance of Disapproval; Image Concerns), Family Communication (Less Talking About Feelings; Coming Out and Staying Out; Changing Communication; Censoring Information; Feeling Responsible for Communication; Educating Others; Indirect Communication), Community (Lack of LGB Support; Being Gay Is Not Okay; Intrapersonal Issues with Religion; Careful Who Knows), and Intrapersonal Struggles (Going to Therapy; Being True To You). Finally, a substantive code, *Dynamic Interactions on Long-Term Sexual Orientation Disclosure in a Conflicted Environment,* was created, which described the core story that emerged in the data. The next chapter will review the findings from this study, as well as discuss limitations and directions for future research.

Chapter V: Discussion

In this chapter, themes that emerged from the data will be reviewed and their relationship to existing literature will be discussed. Next, the implication of the findings will be addressed, as well as limitations that existed within this study. Lastly, directions for future research will be presented.

Summary of Themes

Because there is little information about how lesbians living in rural areas manage family relationships over time after disclosing sexual orientation, the results of the 11 semi-structured interviews will be used to understand this process. The participants' responses revealed 17 themes that were combined into 4 overarching categories. Additionally, these themes will be discussed in relation to the corresponding research question.

Research Question 1: How did coming out affect perceived relationships with family members?

Family processes. Five themes addressed how each family processed and reacted to the participant's sexual orientation disclosure: Pushed Out/Outed, Disruption of Homeostasis, Varying Reactions, Acceptance of Disapproval, and Image Concerns. These themes described how individuals came out to their families, the ways in which sexual orientation disclosure impacted their families in both the short and long term, levels of acceptance, and concerns about the family's image within their community.

Research Question 2: What perceived changes in family relationships occurred?

Family communication. The category of Family Communication patterns demonstrated seven themes: Less Talking About Feelings, Coming Out and Staying Out,

Changing Communication, Censoring Information, Feeling Responsible for Communication, Educating Others, and Indirect Communication. These themes outlined the family's typical style of communication prior to sexual orientation disclosure, as well as concrete examples of how communication changed, for better or worse, after coming out.

Research Question 3: How did coming out in a rural area impact the process of revealing one's sexual orientation?

Community. Next, four themes emerged in the participants' interactions with their community: Lack of LGB Support, Being Gay Is Not Okay, Intrapersonal Issues with Religion, and Careful Who Knows. These themes reflect the interaction between the participant and their experiences within their community. Additionally, these themes described messages individuals received about what it means to be a lesbian in a rural area, conflicts with growing up in a conservative, religious environment, and the impact of managing who is privy to one's sexual orientation.

Intrapersonal struggles. Next, two themes were noted that reflected Intrapersonal Struggles the participants experienced while coming out and making sense of their own sexual orientation: Going to Therapy and Being True To You. These themes demonstrate how individuals made sense of their sexual orientation in a rural environment that was not always accepting or approving.

Lastly, a final category was developed, *Dynamic Interactions on Long-Term Sexual Orientation Disclosure in a Conflicted Environment,* which subsumes all of the themes discovered in the participants' responses. This category demonstrated how the participants developed a reciprocal relationship with their families and communities,

while also reflecting on intrapersonal experiences, to navigate sexual orientation disclosure over time and make adjustments according to the level of acceptance in their environment. This theme demonstrated the unified experiences of all the participants as well as how the individual themes related together as a whole. Lastly, *Dynamic Interactions on Long-Term Sexual Orientation Disclosure in a Conflicted Environment,* demonstrated how the process of coming out was not a static event; rather, it appeared that coming out involved a series of events that the individual endured in various contexts. Furthermore, as one participant noted, just because an individual came out did not mean her job was over because there were additional factors that emerged over time as the participants figured out how to manage relationships with their family members on a long-term basis while incorporating community influences.

Current Findings In Comparison with Existing Literature

This section will address the results of the current research study in relation to previous literature, including the process of coming out and specific challenges faced by rural sexual minorities.

In the context of the rural environment, many participants reported experiences congruent with previous research findings, including little exposure to other gays and lesbians, families lacking accurate information about what it means to be queer, (Waldner & Magruder, 1999), feeling isolated, fearing rejection from family members (Matthews & Lease, 2000), difficulty finding affirmative social support networks (Boulden, 2001; D'Augelli & Hart, 1987; McCarthy, 2000), lack of privacy and anonymity (APA, 2004; McCarthy), and difficulty managing who is privy to one's sexual orientation (McCarthy). Furthermore, similar to the results of Boulden's (2001) study on rural gay men

experiencing a “don’t ask, don’t tell” environment, many of the participants in this study reported that although they came out, many felt pressured to go back in the closet or developed the need to censor and hide information about their lives that might indicate their sexual orientation. Thus, while the participants of this study did not report directly experiencing a “don’t ask, don’t tell” environment, the spirit of this concept was certainly present in guiding their lives and interactions with their community and family members.

Although this study did not directly aim to examine patterns of how participants came out and to whom, this process was discussed in the context of family members’ reactions. Furthermore, the participants revealed coming out processes similar to findings from previous literature (Green, 2002; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003) reporting that most came out to friends and siblings first and then parents next.

Perhaps the most significant finding from the current study, which has been briefly described in previous literature, is more information about the actual process by which rural lesbians navigate family relationships after sexual orientation disclosure and the family’s long-term adjustment processes. Previous literature has described the variation in adjustment over time within families (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008), noting that it is hard to predict the consequences of coming out on family relationships (Green). Families may react negatively at first but become more tolerant and accepting over time. Other families may experience no changes at all (Connolly, 2006; Green). Family roles and expectations may shift, as well as the ways in which closeness, distancing, and boundaries are experienced (Connolly); however, the disclosure of sexual orientation will generally be processed through the family’s usual means of coping (Green). Furthermore,

integrating new family roles after coming out is not unique to sexual minorities, but these issues appeared intensified in rural areas (D'Augelli & Hart, 1987).

Previous literature has also examined the experiences of women who identified as lesbian or bisexual (Oswald, 2000), but not solely lesbians, and not rural lesbians in particular. The study by Oswald found that many participants reported changes in social networks, including limiting ties with those who voiced discriminatory views of the LGB community; however, in the current study, a number of participants reported maintaining relationships with family members despite disapproval of their sexual minority status or experiencing some degree of rejection. In fact, a number of participants in the current study experienced quite negative reactions from family members, leading to a temporary disruption in the family's closeness that was eventually restored with some adjustments and modifications, namely through communication. It should be noted that for the individuals who experienced negative reactions from family members, resolving homeostasis did not return the family to the previous level of closeness, at least not in the participants' view, however, they were able to maintain a relationship with unaccepting or disapproving family members by making adjustments in their relationships to minimize conflict. For example, P9 described "safe zones" of topics that she can discuss with her family. P1 also described how the "policy" that has dictated communication with her family members over the past couple of years has been to avoid discussions about her sexual orientation because "if [we] talk about it, that's when the fighting starts, so if we just avoid it, it keeps everybody neutral." Furthermore, a number of participants in the current study reported an on-going process of monitoring relationships with family

members, which was mediated, in most cases, by the participant choosing to not disclose information about their sexual orientation.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

First, this study demonstrated some significant strengths, including participants of various birth cohorts, a wide range of reactions from family members, and variations in amount of time post-disclosure. Thus, while these assets allowed for a wide-ranging sample, it also limits the ability to generalize findings to a larger group of rural lesbians. Furthermore, considering that the goal of qualitative research, and specifically grounded theory, is to discover phenomena of which there has been little exploration, it is not atypical for generalizability to be limited. Thus, this study demonstrated no more limitation of generalizability than a typical study utilizing grounded theory would.

This sample was also limited by geographical region. Most of the participants in this study had lived and come out in the Appalachian, Midwest, or East coast regions of the United States. Thus, considering that their experiences have occurred mostly throughout the Eastern half of the United States, they might not be generalizable to individuals living in rural frontier areas.

This sample was also limited by a wide variation in experiences coming out. For example, some participants had quite positive experiences coming out, while others endured more struggles with their families in reestablishing homeostasis. It might be worthwhile to study these populations separately to delineate clear distinctions between these two populations and specific characteristics that contributed to a more positive or negative response from one's family.

Qualitative research is designed to limit influence from researcher bias. Additional measures were utilized to reduce researcher bias and enhance trustworthiness and credibility of this study; however, despite these attempts, it is possible that researcher's experiences, expectations, and biases influenced the data analysis process.

Additionally, to produce more generalizability, it would also be worthwhile if future research could study these phenomena using a larger sample size and different study methods to determine if these findings are reproducible. For example, future research could study long-term navigation of family dynamics through mixed methods or quantitative methodology and utilize a larger sample to determine if these findings are generalizable.

Conclusions

The researcher of this study sought to explore the process by which lesbians living in rural communities navigate the process of sexual orientation disclosure over time. Through 11 semi-structured interviews, 17 themes emerged, which were categorized into 4 over-arching groups: Family Processes, Family Communication, Community, and Intrapersonal Struggles. The sub-categories within these larger categories were combined to create the substantive code, *Dynamic Interactions on Long-Term Sexual Orientation Disclosure in a Conflicted Environment,* which represents the core story of how rural lesbians manage family relationships over time after sexual orientation disclosure. Additionally, *Dynamic Interactions on Long-Term Sexual Orientation Disclosure in a Conflicted Environment* demonstrates the everlasting nature of this process and reflects a process of long-term adjustment rather than a static event. The results of the current study demonstrate the notion that family relationships can, and

do, continue to change throughout one's life. Furthermore, it appeared that the rural environment added specific and unique challenges to this process for the participants as well as their families. This process also appeared to be reciprocal and dynamic in nature. In other words, the participants continuously manage intrapersonal experiences, messages from their communities, and experiences within their families to create, develop, and modify homeostasis in their environment, and the process by which they typically do this occurs through closely monitoring how they communicate information about their sexual orientation.

Tables

Table 1. Participant Demographic Information

Participant Number	Age	Ethnicity	SES	Educational Attainment	Age at Disclosure	Currently Partnered	Current Religious Affiliation
P1	22	Caucasian	Lower middle	Bachelor's in progress	16	Yes	Atheist
P2	26	African American	Middle	Master's in progress	22	No	None
P3	49	Caucasian	Middle	Master's	46	Yes	None
P4	23	Caucasian	Upper middle	Bachelors	22	No	None
P5	21	Caucasian	Lower middle	Bachelors in progress	19	No	None
P6	49	Caucasian	Lower middle	Master's	19	No	Christian
P7	56	Caucasian	Middle	Bachelors	49	Yes	None
P8	33	Caucasian	Lower middle	Master's	29	Yes	Christian
P9	55	Caucasian	Middle	Master's	39	No	Buddhist
P10	42	African American	Lower middle	Bachelor's in progress	36	Yes	Christian
P11	26	Caucasian	Lower middle	Doctoral in progress	18	No	None

Table 2. Initial Coding Meaning Units

Themes	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11
Pushed Out/Outed	X	X			X	X	X		X		X
Disruption of Homeostasis	X	X	X			X			X		X
Varying Reactions	X	X	X		X	X				X	X
Acceptance of Unacceptance	X				X	X		X			X
Image Concerns	X								X		X
Less Talking About Feelings				X		X	X		X		
Came Out & Continued Discussion		X	X								X
Changing Communication	X				X	X				X	X
Censoring Information	X				X	X				X	X
Responsible for Conversations			X			X	X				
Educating Others	X	X			X	X			X		
Indirect Communication	X	X						X	X		
Lack of LGB Support	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Being Gay Is Not Okay				X	X						X
Careful Who You Tell		X	X		X	X		X			X
Going to Therapy	X		X						X	X	
Being True To Yourself	X						X	X	X		

Table 3. Focused Codes

Category	Meaning Unit	Endorsed by Participants	Meaning Unit Example
Family Processes	Pushed Out/Outed	P1, P2, P5, P6, P7, P9, P11	"I was actually outed to my family. Uh, I have suspicion of who did it but they sent an anonymous email to my mother saying that I was in a lesbian relationship and that she should end it before I like tarnish my reputation…"
	Disrupted Homeostasis	P1, P2, P3, P6, P9, P11	"…Uh but so, I called my mother, er, my mother called me, and before she even said anything I said it's true, and she said, "end it or I'm done." And she hung up on me. And so she basically like disowned me for about 6 months…"
	Varying Reactions	P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P10, P11	"My dad was great and my oldest sister was great too… Um so my middle sister took it very hard. She didn't let me know that... And uh, my mother obviously did not take it well…"
	Acceptance of Disapproval	P1, P5, P6, P8, P11	"…I guess I'm a bit more understanding that people are ignorant of certain different kinds of individuals out there and also just the fact that our society has

			changed a lot from when they were growing up and just being more understanding that they're getting used to seeing more diverse people out there and being more open about being out in the public and stuff like that…"
	Image Concerns	P1, P9, P11	"Um back to my mom with the whole, I think image thing, I think that bothered her a lot. Um how would people think of her because I'm gay? Or how would they think of me?"
Family Communication	Less Talking About Feelings	P4, P6, P7, P9	"We talked about social issues a lot. Maybe less talking about feelings… um both my parents come from Midwestern backgrounds so there's sort of a stoic Midwestern "we're not going to talk about this." But if anybody was ever seriously concerned about something obviously the expectation was that you could talk about it."
	Coming Out & Staying Out	P2, P3, P11	"…He's the only one in my family who like asks me every time we talk if

		I'm dating anyone or you know something like that, so it's nice to have someone in my family who is actually like wanting to know about that part of my life…"
Changing Communication	P1, P5, P6, P10, P11	"…Um I mean we're not as close as we were, I think. Like I don't tell her as much and so she doesn't feel…. she feels like I'm not the person she raised, her words exactly…"
Censoring Information	P1, P5, P6, P10, P11	"…Uh I guess after coming out I've just adjusted what I talk about with them, uh and so it's just like a screening process. It's like oh this is a safe zone to go in so we can talk about this uh or no I don't really feel comfortable talking about this…"
Responsible for Conversations	P3, P6, P7	"…I think the responsibility, I feel like the responsibility has fallen on me to bring it up and do, what I call temperature checks. It's all about communication, right? Even if it's hard…"
Educating Others	P1, P2, P5, P6, P9	"…I really just want

			to educate my family more than anything especially after coming here…"
	Indirect Communication	P1, P2, P8, P9	"…I know that I was in a serious relationship and my dad's sister more or less found out because she was showing me some houses and the former girlfriend was with me and we kind of was holding hands or something in the back seat of her car and I think she saw it. So that was kind of that way. So yea, I'm more of a subtle person instead of being really direct…"
Community	Lack of LGB Support	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11	"Um, I mean, I think it's just harder to recognize that there is a community of other gay people and other queer people…"
	Being Gay Is Not Okay	P4, P5, P11	"…Um and so I think that I sort of just always thought, well that's not an option, I couldn't possibly be you know that kind of person because of the climate that there is towards queer people in this area…"

	Careful Who You Tell	P2, P3, P5, P6, P8, P11	"It's entirely possible that being from a rural area might affect how selective I was and who I chose and how I came out as well because I was very careful…"
Intrapersonal Struggles	Going To Therapy	P1, P3, P9, P10	"…So I have grown and had therapy (laughs). I had therapy to kind of get the pieces of the pie together and that has helped…"
	Being True To You	P1, P7, P8, P9	"I mean it does scare me but you have to stick true to yourself I think. And I wish I would have known that more than what I did when I came out. It just kind of happened and I couldn't deal with it you know so, I wish, I hope that they can learn to deal with it and know that it's okay, like before your parents scream at you and blow up it's okay…"

References

American Psychological Association. (2004). *Lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents – Special populations.* Washington DC: Author.

American Psychological Association. (2008). *Answers to your questions: For a better understanding of sexual orientation and homosexuality.* Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from www.apa.org/topics/sorientation.pdf.

Anton, B.S. (2010). Proceedings of the American Psychological Association for the legislative year 2009: Minutes of the annual meeting of the Council of Representatives and minutes of the meetings of the Board of Directors. American Psychologist, 65, 385-475. doi: 10.1037/a0019553

Boulden, W. (2001). Gay men living in a rural environment. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services: Issues in Practice, Policy & Research, 12*(3/4), 63-75.

Carnelley, K., Hepper, E., Hicks, C., & Turner, W. (2011). Perceived parental reactions to coming out, attachment, and romantic relationship views. *Attachment & Human Development, 13*(3), 217-236. doi:10.1080/14616734.2011.563828.

Charmaz, K. (2006). Coding in grounded theory practice. In *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis* (pp. 42-71). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Cohn, T. & Hastings, S. (2010). Resilience among rural lesbian youth. *Journal of Lesbian Studies, 14*(1), 71-79. doi: 10.1080/10894160903060325.

Connolly, C. (2006). A process of change: The intersection of the GLBT individual and his or her family of origin. In J. Bigner (Ed.), *An introduction to GLBT family studies* (pp. 5-21). New York: Hayworth.

Creswell, J. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

D'Augelli, A., Collins, C., & Hart, M. (1987). Social support patterns of lesbian women in a rural helping network. *Journal of Rural Community Psychology, 8*(1), 12-22.

D'Augelli, A., & Hart, M. (1987). Gay women, men, and families in rural settings: Toward the development of helping communities. American Journal of Community Psychology, 15(1), 79-93.

Fassinger, R. (2005). Paradigms, praxis, problems, and promise: Grounded theory in counseling psychology research. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 52*(2), 156–166, doi: 10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.156.

Green, R. (2002). Coming out to family… in context. In E. Davis-Russell (Ed.), *The California School of Professional Psychology handbook of multicultural education, research, intervention, and training* (pp. 277-284). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Heatherington, L., & Lavner, J. (2008). Coming to terms with coming out: Review and recommendations for family systems-focused research. *Journal of Family Psychology, 22*(3), 329-343. doi: 10.1037/0893-3200.22.3.329.

Herek, G., Kimmel, D., Amaro, H., & Melton, G. (1991). Avoiding heterosexual bias in psychological research. *American Psychologist, 46*(9).

Hilton, A., & Szymanski, D. (2011). Family dynamics and changes in sibling of origin relationship after lesbian and gay sexual orientation disclosure. *Contemporary Family Therapy, 33*, 291-309, doi: 10.1007/s10591-011-9157-3.

Hoyt, W. & Bhati, K. (2007). Principles and practices: An empirical examination of qualitative research in the Journal of Counseling Psychology. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 54*(2), 201-210.

Isserman, A. M. (2005). In the national interest: Defining rural and urban correctly in research and public policy. *International Regional Science Review, 28,* 465-499. doi: 10.1177/0160017605279000

Kinsey, A. C., Pomeroy, W.B., Martin, C.E., & Gebhard, P.H. (1953). *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female.* Oxford, England: Saunders.

Liddle, B. J. (2007a). Mutual bonds: Lesbian women's lives and communities. In K. Biescheke, R. Perez, & K. DeBord, (Eds.), Handbook of counseling and psychotherapy with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender clients. Washington DC: American Psychological Association.

Liddle, B. J. (2007b). The challenge of understanding LGBTQ lives and experiences. In V. Clarke & E. Peel, (Eds.), *Out in psychology: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer perspectives.* Chichester, England: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Leedy, G., & Connolly, C. (2007). Out in the cowboy state: A look at lesbian and gay lives in Wyoming. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services, 19*(1), 17-34. doi: 10.1300/J041v19n01_02.

Matthews, C., & Lease, S. (2000). Focus on lesbian, gay, and bisexual families. In R. Perez, K. DeBord, & K. Bieschke (Eds.), *Handbook of counseling and psychotherapy with lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients* (pp. 249-273). Washington DC: American Psychological Association.

Magnuson, S., & Shaw, H. (2003). Adaptations of the multifaceted genogram in counseling, training, and supervision. *The Family Journal, 11*, 45–54. Doi: 10.1177/1066480702238472.

McCarthy, L. (2000). Poppies in a wheat field: Exploring the lives of rural lesbians. *Journal of Homosexuality, 39*(1), 75-94. doi: 10.1300/J082v39n01_05.

McGoldrick, M., Shellenberger, S., & Petry, S. (2008). Genograms: Assessment and intervention (3rd ed.). New York: Norton.

Morrow, S. (2007). Qualitative research in counseling psychology: Conceptual foundations. The Counseling Psychologist, 35(2), 209-235. doi: 10.1177/0011000006286990.

Oswald, R. (2000). Family and friendship relationships after young women come out as bisexual or lesbian. *Journal of Homosexuality, 38*(3), 65-83. doi: 10.1300/J082v38n09_04.

Oswald, R. F. (2002). Who am I in relation to them? Gay, lesbian, and queer people leave the city to attend rural family weddings. Journal of Family Issues, 23(3), 323-348. doi: 10.1177/0192513X02023003001.

Polkinghorne, D. (2005). Language and meaning: Data collection in qualitative research. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 52*(2), 137–145, doi: 10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.137.

Ponterotto, J. (2005). Qualitative research in counseling psychology: A primer on research paradigms and philosophy of science. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 52*(2), 126 – 136, doi:10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.126.

Savin-Williams, R., & Ream, G. (2003). Sex variations in the disclosure to parents of same-sex attraction. Journal of Family Psychology, 17(3), 429-138. doi: 10.1037/0893-3200.17.3.429.

Shank, J., & Skovholt, T. (2006). Ethical practice in small communities. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Swainson, M. & Tasker, F. (2006). Genograms redrawn: Lesbian couples define their families. In J. Bigner (Ed.), *Introduction to GLBT Family Studies* (pp. 89-115). Binghampton, NY: Hayworth.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2010). United States census 2010: Urban and rural classification. Retrieved Sept. 25, 2012, from: http://www.census.gov/geo/www/ua/2010urbanruralclass.html

Valentine, G., Skelton, T., & Butler, R. (2003). Coming out and outcomes: negotiating lesbian and gay identities with, and in, the family. Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, 21(4), 479-499. doi: 10.1068/d277l.

Waldner, L., & Magrader, B. (1999). Coming out to parents. *Journal of Homosexuality, 37*(2), 83-100, doi: 10.1300/J082v37n02_05.

Wang, Y. (2011). Voices from the margin: A case study of a rural lesbian's experience with woman-to-woman sexual violence. *Journal of Lesbian Studies, 15*(2), 166-175. doi: 10.1080/10894160.2011.521099.

Werth, J., Hastings, S., Riding-Malon, R. (2010). Ethical challenges of practicing in rural areas. Journal of Clinical Psychology: In Session, 66(5), 537-548. doi: 10.1002/jclp.20681.

Williams, I., Williams, D., Pellegrino, A., & Warren, J. (2012). Providing mental health services for racial, ethnic, and sexual orientation minority gourps in rural areas. In K. B. Smalley, J. Warren, & J. Rainer (Eds.) *Rural Mental Health: Issues, Policies, and Best Practices.* New York: Springer Publishing Company.

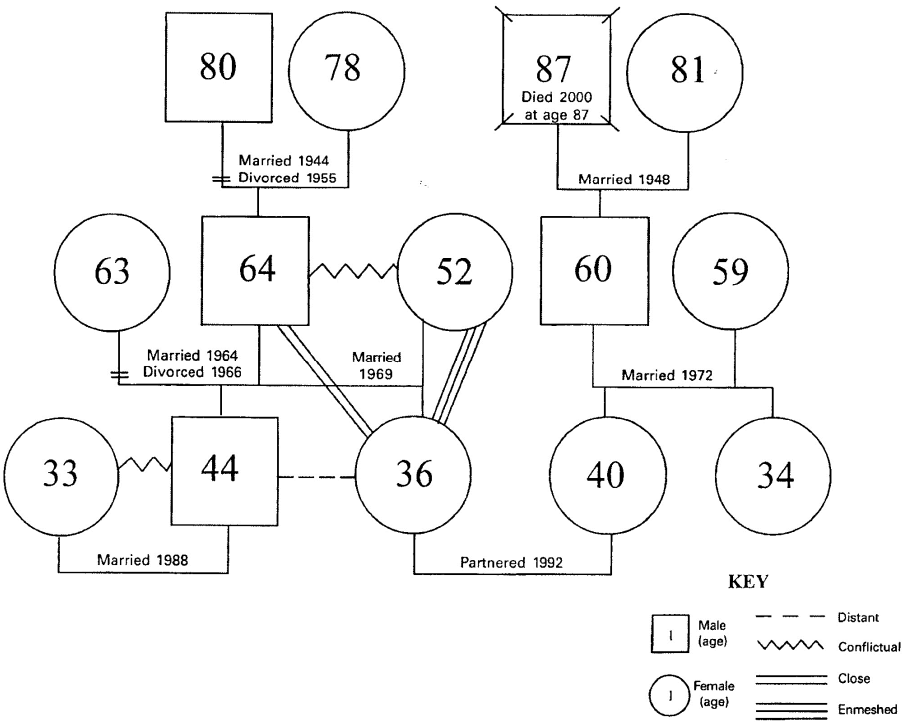
Willoughby, B., Malik, N., & Lindahl, K. (2006). Parental reactions to their sons' sexual orientation disclosures: The roles of family cohesion, adaptability, and parenting style. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity, 7*(1), 14-26, doi: 10.1037/1524-9220.7.1.14.

Yeh, C., & Inman, A. (2007). Qualitative data analysis and interpretation in counseling psychology: Strategies for best practices. *The Counseling Psychologist, 35*, 369-403. doi: 10.1177/0011000006292596.

Appendix A

Genogram Example

From Magnuson & Shaw (2003):



Appendix B

Letter Requesting Participation

Date

Dear

I am writing to request your assistance in the completion of my doctoral dissertation in which I will investigate the unique experience rural lesbians have when coming out to their families. Revealing sexual orientation to one's family can be a complex decision, and through my own work in rural areas and with the LGBT community, I have recognized the additional stressors that lesbian women living in rural areas often encounter when coming out.

If you agree to participate then I will interview you for about 60 to 90 minutes (depending on how much you have to say) regarding your experience as a lesbian woman living in a rural area and how your family relationships may have been affected by the coming out process. Information obtained in the interview will be stored securely and reported anonymously to protect the identity of participants. After all interviews are completed, interviewee's anonymous responses will be summarized and sent to all participants in order to receive feedback on how well my summaries reflect your experiences.

If you are willing to be interviewed, I can meet with you at Radford University or another mutually agreeable location. I will contact you by telephone within the next week to answer any questions and ask about your willingness to participate, as well as schedule an interview.

This study has received approval by my dissertation committee and the Radford University Institutional Review Board. My advisor, Dr. Sarah Hastings, is available to answer questions you may have about the approval process.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Glass, M.S.
Psy.D. Student
Radford University
Email: jglass4@radford.edu

Sarah Hastings, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Psychology
Radford University
Phone: (540) 831-6169
Email: slhasting@radford.edu

Appendix C

Consent Form

You are being asked to participate in a study about the unique experience of rural lesbians. Specifically, from this study we hope to learn the ways in which coming out may have affected your family relationships.

If you agree to participate, I will interview you for approximately 60 to 90 minutes and ask a series of open-ended questions. The interview will be audiotaped for transcription purposes. Audiotapes will be stored securely and then erased once transcription is complete. All data will be presented anonymously in final form. Any information obtained in connection with this study that can be linked to you will be kept confidential. The risks of participating in this study are minimal, and sometimes people report painful emotions when discussing relationships with family members.

You will be provided with a summary of the results after analyses have been completed and given an opportunity to provide feedback on the representation of your experience.

Your decision whether to participate will not affect your future relations with Radford University. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Jennifer Glass, jglass4@radford.edu or Dr. Sarah Hastings, slhasting@radford.edu or 540-831-6169. This study has received approval by my dissertation committee and the Radford University Institutional Review Board. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant or have complaints about this study, you should contact Dr. Dennis Grady, Dean, College of Graduate and Professional Studies, Radford University, dgrady4@radford.edu, 540-831-7163.

Thank You,

You are making a decision whether to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to participate. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice after signing this form should you choose to discontinue participation in this study.

_____ _____

Signature Date

_____

Signature of Investigator

Appendix D

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Interview Questions adapted from Hilton & Szymanski (2011):

- Tell me about where you grew up.
- What was your family like growing up?
- Tell me about your relationships with family members before coming out.
- How did you come out to family members?
- How did your family members react when you came out?
- How do you feel about their reactions?
    - How have your feelings changed over time?
    - Can you describe a specific time where you felt a shift in your feelings?
- How has your sexual orientation affected your relationships with your family?
- How did your coming out affect your relationships with family members?
- How do you manage relationships with unaccepting family members or your partner's unaccepting family members?
- How has your identity as a lesbian affected your relationships outside the family and within your community?
- How have you coped with your experiences?
- How important is religion to your family? How important is religion to you?
- How satisfied do you feel with your current relationships?
- Is there anything else you would like to share with me or you'd like others to know about your experiences as a lesbian in a rural area?

Appendix E

Questions for Creating the Genogram

- How do you define family?
- Tell me about the members of your immediate family.
    - Tell me about your parent(s)
        - What are their ages?
        - Are they still together?
        - If they are divorced/separated, are they remarried?
        - Tell me about your relationship(s) with your parent(s) before coming out
        - Tell me about your relationship(s) with your parent(s) now
    - Tell me about your sibling(s)
        - What is their birth order?
        - What are their ages?
        - Are they partnered?
        - Do they have children?
        - Tell me about your relationship(s) with your sibling(s) before coming out
        - Tell me about your relationship(s) with your sibling(s) now
    - Tell me about your grandparents
        - What are their ages?
        - Are they still together?
        - If they are divorced/separated, are they remarried
        - Tell me about your relationship(s) with your grandparent(s) before coming out
        - Tell me about your relationship(s) with your grandparent(s) now
    - Is anyone else in your family LGBT?
- How would your ideal genogram look? What would be different?

Appendix F

Mental Health Resources in the New River Valley

Free Clinic of the NRV, Inc.
www.nrvfreeclinic.org and 540-381-0820 - provides medical, mental, dental, and pharmacy services to people who lack health insurance and how low incomes.

New River Valley Community Services
www.nrvcs.org and 540-961-8400 - provides services in areas of mental health, intellectual disabilities, substance use disorders and related prevention services.

The Family Therapy Center of Virginia Tech
http://www.familytherapy.vt.edu/ftc.html and 540-231-7201

Roanoke Diversity Center
www.Roanokediversitycenter.com - considered the physical and virtual hub of the LGBT community of southwest Virginia.

PFLAG
www.community.pflag.org - Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays
http://www.pflagnrv.org/ - PFLAG of the New River Valley

Appendix G

Follow up letter

Date

Dear

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me recently. I appreciate your participation and sharing your experience as a lesbian woman living in a rural area.

I hope to summarize the findings from all interviews by early 2013. In accordance with the research protocol, I will send you a copy of the results so you can review them. Additionally, I would like you to provide feedback on the results; specifically, how well my summary reflects your experiences as you described them to me.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Glass, M.S.
Psy.D. Student
Radford University
Email: jglass4@radford.edu

Appendix H

Accompanying Letter

Date

Dear

The preliminary analysis of my dissertation research is completed and I would appreciate feedback on how well my summaries reflect your experiences. This is a summary of all interviewees, so your exact experience may not be represented; furthermore, if you provided unique answers, you may not find them in the summary because I needed at least 3 participants to discuss an issue for it to be included in the final analysis.

Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns about how your material was included in the attached analysis. If you think this description is accurate, please let me know that.

Because of time constraints, I would appreciate feedback within two weeks. If I have not heard from you within that time, I will assume that you found the results to be representative of your experience. If you would like to provide feedback, please email me at jglass4@radford.edu. If you prefer not to contact me directly, you may email my dissertation chair, Dr. Sarah Hastings, at slhasting@radford.edu.

Again I would like to express my appreciation to you. Your time and consideration has assisted me in better understanding the experiences of rural lesbians.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Glass, M.S.
Psy.D. Student
Radford University
Email: jglass4@radford.edu