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Moments of Trust: Sibling Responses to the Disclosure of a Sister's Lesbian Identity

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Moments of Trust:
Sibling Responses to the Disclosure of a Sister's Lesbian Identity

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Science at Virginia Commonwealth University

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Abstract

MOMENTS OF TRUST: SIBLING RESPONSES TO THE DISCLOSURE OF A SISTER'S LESBIAN IDENTITY

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2003

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To better understand the responses of siblings to the disclosure of a sister's lesbian identity, eight pairs of siblings, each consisting of one lesbian participant and one of her siblings, were interviewed. Both lesbian and sibling participants were asked to discuss family relationships before disclosure (coming out), the actual disclosure, sibling reactions, parental reactions, and family relationships since disclosure. Notable results include "closeness" in sibling relationships and high levels of "trust" as strong predictors of supportive sibling responses. Siblings were also found to take on the role of confidant and counselor for their parents as they negotiated their daughters' newly-disclosed sexual orientation.

Chapter One: Introduction

The “coming out” process is a major event in the lives of lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals. Disclosure is an ongoing process, and individuals must make decisions every day about whether or not to come out to certain people, including family members. Families are often thought of as safe havens from the harsh realities of the outside world where members can be open and honest about their lives and find acceptance and approval. However, that is not always the case. This is true especially when it comes to dealing with homosexuality, an issue that is seen in many societies as taboo, anti-family, and even unlawful. While it has been shown that disclosure is related to high self-esteem, many people remain closeted because they are uncertain how family members will react to this new aspect of their identity (Vargo 1998).

Statement of the Problem

The reactions of family are not only influenced by their relationship with the gay member, but also by social forces and traditions that call on them to react in a way that is consistent with societal norms. The revelation that a member of the family is gay can call family and individual beliefs into question, and have strong effects on the way other members of the family see both the gay member and themselves. Anti-gay bias and discrimination run so deeply in American society that relatives often feel effects of the

negative stigma associated with homosexuality. Some choose to disassociate from the gay or lesbian individual rather than risk being stigmatized themselves.

The study of sibling reactions to disclosure is important because the first family members who gay males and lesbians come out to are often siblings (Devine 1984; Jones 1978). Their responses can give the disclosing member a possible look into how other family members, such as parents, will react and help them determine whether or not there is a supportive network within the family structure to lean on (Mays et al. 1998). Past research on the disclosure of homosexuality, or “coming out,” has focused mainly on the effects on the gay individual’s self-esteem or the reactions of parents. This study focuses on siblings in the disclosure process and the following research questions:

1. Why do lesbians choose to disclose their sexual orientation to siblings?
2. How do siblings experience the coming out process of a lesbian sister (i.e. how do they react)?
3. What variables influence these reactions?
4. What happens during the time following disclosure and how does the disclosure affect family interaction?

Through these questions, this study examines the effect that the disclosure of a lesbian identity has on a female’s siblings, and how family interaction and relationships are changed after the disclosure.

Personal Background

I feel that it is important to note the role my own history has played in the development of this study. I am the youngest of six children. When I was twenty, my

youngest sister, thirty-two at the time, came out to me. While not being shocked or surprised by the news, it definitely marked a new and exciting time for me. I was supportive of my sister and happy to be in on the secret.

But as I became more vocal in my support for my sister and the rights of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender (GLBT) community, I slowly began to realize that for some of my other siblings, one in particular, my sister's lesbianism was not a topic of which they wished to be reminded. What I had always thought of as an open and accepting family was changing before my eyes. I wondered how two siblings from the same family could have such polarized opinions concerning my sister, while the others fell somewhere in between. Being the youngest in the family, I theorized that age had something to do with it, though my older siblings were only separated by a few years. Sex, especially sexual orientation, was something my parents never really talked to me about, and I assumed that was the case with my older siblings. Could that have something to do with our reactions? How about religious beliefs? I knew no one had ever discussed the subject with me, but did my older brothers and sisters ever discuss it in an attempt to better understand the situation? Did my parents come to them with questions?

It was with these questions in mind that I began this examination of sibling reactions sister's lesbian identity. However, I was concerned that I might be a biased researcher. Was I not "too close" to this subject to be objective? These were important questions that I, a relative newcomer to sociological inquiry, had to address. As I did more research, especially in qualitative studies, I found that the voice of the researcher

was key in helping to understand the reality of the subject. The idea that having interest in, or a personal relationship to a subject ultimately resulted in biased analysis (once an epistemological “given”) was being questioned. As Croteau states:

...silence on the issue of biography is more like a legacy of a particular approach to “science.” “Science,” in some circles, is seen as being predicated upon reduction and objectification. Knowledge and “truth” are supposedly the result of distancing the subjective observer from the object in order to reveal the transparent truth, unsoiled by the touch of the researcher. Of course, in its pure form, this is fantasy (1995: xxii).

While some might argue that my situation has created a biased perspective, I believe it has merely provided me with a starting point for inquiring about sibling and parental reactions to a family member’s homosexuality. My experience coming from a family that has dealt with this issue in its own way had no effect on the responses of the participants of this study; it simply allowed me to understand the complexity of the issue at hand. For those who remain skeptical, a section on the trustworthiness of my study can be found in Chapter Four.

Outline

Chapter Two will begin with a discussion of relevant literature dealing with the coming out process. Though few previous studies have examined the effects of disclosure on siblings, much work has been done on the reasons for disclosure and its effects on the family, especially parents. This chapter will continue with an examination of the theoretical foundations of my study. Descriptions of stigma and stigma exchange, family systems theory, and anomie will be provided as a backdrop for my discussion. Data collection and analysis methods, along with the trustworthiness and limitations of

my study, will be addressed in Chapter Three. In the fourth chapter, the results of my inquiry will be presented. Chapter Five will conclude my study with a discussion of the results, in light of previous research and theory.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Before the 1970s “most people perceived little to gain and everything to lose by claiming a gay identity in a heterosexual context” (Weston 1991: 44-45).

Institutionalization was used as a “treatment” and during the McCarthy era imprisonment for being a known homosexual was a common occurrence thanks to its purported association with godlessness and communism. “If you were thought to be a person who was a lesbian or a gay person, you could be fired from your job, and there would be no question that you would never find another one” (Weston 1991:45).

The Stonewall Rebellion occurred on the night of June 27th 1969, causing a change in gay identity politics and igniting the gay rights movement in America. The Stonewall Inn was a gay bar in Greenwich Village, New York. After a series of raids on local gay bars by the police, Stonewall was finally targeted. However, this raid had a much different ending, as the bar’s patrons rioted. An open sense of gay pride was born, and thus began the public battle against discrimination of gays and lesbians. Since then, more and more lesbians and gay males are embracing their gay identities and taking the important, but often uncertain step of coming out to their families and society at large (Weston 1991).

Self-disclosure

Self-disclosure of homosexuality occurs when a lesbian or gay male realizes that she or he is in fact homosexual (Coleman 1982; Vargo 1998). It is viewed by some as a

“declaration of independence” (Weston 1991: 70). One interesting and ambitious study compared the demographic and mental health characteristics of 184 pairs of lesbians and their straight sisters. While not specifically asking if the lesbian was out to their straight sisters, it found that those who self-identified as lesbian were more educated, more likely to live in urban areas, more geographically mobile, and had higher self-esteem than their straight sisters (Rothblum and Factor 2001). In order to achieve this elevated status of mental health, self disclosure is crucial. Gays and lesbians are not immune to the heterosexist stereotypes that permeate society, and many homosexual youths deny their orientation in an attempt to fit in to the heterosexual roles they have been assigned by others (Coleman 1982; Newman and Muzzonigro 1993). They must overcome the stereotypes and biases they hold about homosexuality or suffer from a diminished sense of self-esteem (Hammersmith and Weinberg 1973, Coleman 1982, Vargo 1998).

The Family

Whether or not to come out to family members can be one of the most difficult decisions a gay male or lesbian can make. Strong family networks are a resource and an area of support for their members. While honesty and openness are key factors in any healthy family relationship, many are not very open when it comes to the subjects of sex and sexuality. In many cases, outright discussions about sex are rare (Weston 1991).

In a time in which homosexuality is still looked down upon in western society, it is obvious that coming out is a huge step that can test the limits of familial love. Those who hide their sexual orientation while struggling with the decision of whether or not to

come out to their families are, according to MacDonald, “half members of the family unit: afraid and alienated, unable to ever be totally open and spontaneous (1983: 1). However, with disclosure comes the threat of rejection. So powerful is this threat that many never tell their families of their homosexual identities. Weston (1991: 44) states: “...coming out to biological kin produces a discourse destined to reveal the ‘truth’ not merely of the self, but of a person’s kinship relations. At the end of what many lesbians and gay men imagined as a long journey to self-discovery, when I tell you ‘who I (really) am,’ I find out who you (really) are to me”.

While it is clear that self-disclosure has a positive effect on a person’s well-being, Coleman states “no one can develop self-concepts such as ‘accepted,’ valued,’ and ‘worthwhile’ all alone. One must take risks to gain acceptance from others” (1982:34). Numerous studies have examined the fear experienced by gays and lesbians when coming out to parents and other family members (e.g. Weston 1991, Oswald 2000; Jones 1978; Vargo 1998). Not all share the same fears, as different family situations can cover a wide range of emotional ties, but there is usually a great deal of apprehension about coming out. Many feel that a family crisis will spring from their disclosure. Gay adolescents with good family relationships may not want to violate heterosexual norms by coming out. Even those who viewed their families as having a more positive view of homosexuality “may try to meet the heterosexual expectations of their predominantly heterosexual families” (Waldner and McGruder 1999: 96). Sixty-six percent of Ben-Ari’s sample had fears about coming out to family members (1995). Some fear the guilt that might come from disappointing their families while others fear outright rejection (Cramer and Roach

1988; Vargo 1998). This fear of rejection has been seen time and time again in studies dealing with disclosure. In his study of 80 gay males and lesbians from the San Francisco Bay area, Weston reported that the “vast majority reported *fears* of being disowned and losing family, even when rejection did not ensue” (1991: 64). While it is true that a change in family relationships will most likely occur, in some cases changes may be more positive than expected (Morales 1990).

In a study of 172 white gay males and lesbians, Waldner and McGruder (1999) discovered that gay youths who reported having a good relationship with their families are less likely to seek information on homosexuality from outside the family. “From the perspective of a gay child, seeking out alternative information may be costly because it violates family expectations. This may result in fewer informational resources to challenge...heterosexual norms” (Waldner and McGruder 1999: 95). Thus, they may be less likely to disclose. Devine reported that children of families that were not connected by an “appreciable degree of affect or expectation” (1984: 12) did not feel a strong desire to reveal their sexual preference. One could assume that those with poor family relationships would feel less of a need to come out. However, those members will generally seek out approval eventually (Divine 1984).

Differences have been found in the familial disclosure processes of minorities and white Americans that can possibly be tied to both social and family experience, and family structure. In a study of disclosure among African-American and white gay and bisexual men, Kennamer et al. (2000) found that African-American males are less likely to be open about their sexuality with their families. In their sample only 46 percent of

African Americans had come out to all or most of their family members compared to 62 percent of whites. A study on minority-group disclosure in Canada found that often Asian, Portuguese, Greek, Italian, and Indo-Pakistani homosexual youth were accepted by family members, but only after those youth distanced themselves from their families and communities (Trembel et al., 1989). Merighi and Grimes' (2000) study on disclosure in a multicultural context yielded no significant results based on ethnic group status, however it did provide insight into the attitudes and assumptions held by certain groups concerning homosexuality.

Minority group members often rely on family for support in dealing with "an often hostile world" (Kennamer et al. 2000: 521). Minority lesbians and gay males rely on family support because it is "the emotional bond for the conscious self and personal psychology" (Morales 1990: 233). Generally, African Americans disclose their homosexuality to female relatives first. This is viewed as an attempt to gain sympathetic allies who can help ease the stress of disclosure throughout the family (Mays et al. 1998). However, this kind of "testing the waters" is not confined to African American family networks. Oswald found that communication between members of family and friendship groups helped the women in her study make "coming out a part of everyday interaction" (2000: 69). Family discussions about homosexuality were examples given of ways to both raise awareness and gauge other's opinions as indicators to possible reactions.

Sibling Interaction

Before discussing variables that may correlate to the reactions of family, sibling interaction must be considered. While the same variables (religiosity, education, previous exposure to homosexuality, etc) that may influence parental reactions apply to siblings, other factors will apply as well. Sibling interaction is heavily influenced by birth order, sex of siblings, age, and number of siblings (Schvaneveldt and Ihinger 1979). Parental control and influence over individual siblings can change over time. Jones states:

It may be important to realize, as many child psychologists point out, that every child born to the same parents has different parents than the previous child. Surely there can be considerable change in the emotional responses of a mother and father to the second child. The first one paved the way...and above all many of the anxieties about childbearing and childrearing are reduced when the next birth occurs (1978:28-29).

Families, like individuals, do not develop in a social vacuum. Other factors weigh heavily on individual members as well as the unit as a whole. Factors such as education, conformity, religiosity, competition, jealousy, financial status, and death are all variables that can have considerable impact on sibling interaction (Schvaneveldt and Ihinger 1979; Jones 1978)

The relationship between gender differences in sibling interaction was examined in a study of 40 sibling dyads by Sandra A Graham-Bermann (1994). She found that younger same-sex siblings were more cooperative with each other. As time progressed, male-male dyads became higher in conflict. On the topic of gender role learning, Dunn found that, on matters of gender-role firstborns (in two-sibling families) are most likely to

be influenced by parents while secondborns are more likely to be influenced by firstborns (1984). There is much contradictory evidence on relationships between sex differences among siblings. Dunn states that “it is clearly *not* the case that sex differences in either younger or older siblings can be linked in a simple or powerfully predictive way to differences in the way in which the children relate to one another” (1984: 71).

Birth order has often been examined in the past to account for personality differences in children. The family is an ever-evolving system in which members assume roles and carry out functions associated with those roles. Firstborns (and older siblings) are often assigned roles of “caretaker” (Bossard and Boll 1956). Large families generally have roles assigned for siblings, and, along with the job of caretaker, older siblings often take on the role of disciplinarian as well (Dunn 1984). Firstborn siblings often feel displaced by their laterborn brothers and sisters (Dunn 1984). In a historical look at birth order and personality, Frank J. Sulloway (1996) found that firstborn children have tended to be more oriented towards preserving the status quo while laterborn children have been much more open to new experiences and become involved in what he called “revolutionary” behavior.

Sibling rivalry and competitive attitudes continue into adulthood, though they decrease with age and distance (Dunn 1984). Rivalries are often reactivated, according to Dunn, “when relationships with the parents are directly involved” (1984: 135). Other events that occur in the lives of siblings tend to have different effects on relationships. Sickness, marriage, divorce, and death can cause changes in the closeness of siblings (Dunn 1984) and one could definitely add disclosure of a homosexual identity to that list.

Variables Leading to Responses

Parental reactions to disclosure can be shaped by numerous variables. In his comprehensive overview of homophobia, Gregory Herek (1984) analyzed the content of numerous studies dealing with homosexuality. He found nine consistent patterns across a variety of samples that are associated with negative attitudes concerning homosexuality. He proposed that persons with negative attitudes are less likely to have had personal contact with homosexuals, less likely to report same-sex sexual activity, more likely to believe their friends have negative attitudes about homosexuality, are older and have less education, are more religious, adhere to traditional ideas about gender roles, are less sexually permissive, and are likely to have more authoritarian personalities (Herek 1984).

As stated by above, variations in responses may be caused by previous exposure to homosexuality. Studies have shown that heterosexuals who reported having personal contact with homosexuals express more positive attitudes concerning gay males and lesbians (Millham, San Miguel, and Kellog 1976; Herek 1984; Herek and Capitanio 1996). An important factor in the reaction is a parent's past thoughts and experiences dealing with homosexuality. Gay males or lesbians perceiving their parents to have previous experience in dealing with civil rights issues, or more importantly gay rights issues, was a positive predictor of their reactions to their child's disclosure (Ben-Ari 1995; Oswald 2000).

One of the major factors that influence the reactions of parents is an adherence to traditional family values. These values are generally thought to be based on conservative

religious beliefs, and an emphasis on marriage and gender roles (Newman and Muzzonigro 1993). Heterosexist stereotypes are commonly expressed by proponents of these traditional values. Misinformation about homosexuality and gender can cause negative reactions to disclosure to occur. Homosexuality is often seen by many as unnatural because it involves non-procreative sexual relationships. Same-sex relationships are not generally associated with traditional concepts of “family” and therefore are rarely thought of in that context. Thus, confusion ensues when it is revealed that one of a person’s own family is gay (Strommen 1990).

Adherence to traditional family values can also shape a family’s views on homosexuality. In a study on traditional family values and their impact on the coming out process of gay males, Newman and Muzzonigro (1993) noted that these values did have an effect on disclosure. The feeling of being different from other boys and amount of family disapproval was stronger in traditionally related families. However, Cramer and Roach (1988) found that mothers who displayed a more traditional sex-role and fathers who adhered to a higher religious orthodoxy were more accepting of their gay sons. Twenty-one percent of those gay sons report immediate improvement in relationships with their fathers.

Families with more traditional religious beliefs have also been shown to hold more negative attitudes concerning homosexuality (Herek 1984, Berenstein 1999)). In Christian-based societies like the U.S., persecution of homosexuals comes from interpretations of the Bible. Bernstein states that the most serious example of homosexuality being forbidden in the Bible comes in Leviticus. However, the book also

forbids “wearing garments with two different kinds of yarn, planting two different seed in the same field, eating raw meat, and touching the skin of a dead pig” (1999: 43).

In the past, science has been used as a basis for the condemnation of homosexuality. This prejudice comes from the psychological tradition of treating homosexuality as a mental disorder (Strommen 1990). In 1973 The American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of psychological illnesses. Another stereotype presented in earlier scientific studies concerning homosexuals, especially gay men, is that they are pedophiles and child molesters (Strommen 1989). This stereotype is an unjust one as there is ample evidence to support the fact that most child molesters are heterosexual males who seek out boys only when there are no girls available to him (Jones 1978).

Laws that criminalize sodomy have also been found to have a relationship with public opinions of homosexuality. In a study of the relationship between state sodomy laws and public opinion, Ann Beverly (1997) found a connection between the regions with the most sodomy laws and the lowest public opinion of homosexuality. The region with the most negative opinions on homosexuality had the most sodomy laws, leaving her to ask the question, “...do sodomy laws influence public opinion about gay men and lesbians *or* does such public opinion influence the status of the law?”(61).

Ben-Ari found that the way disclosure occurred, or “the words actually used in the disclosure” (1995: 106), had an impact on initial parental reaction. When the child disclosed in a positive manner, i.e. “I am gay and very happy” (1995: 106), parents found it easier to adjust than when disclosure occurred in a negative connotation (such as an

argument or in the context of having a problem). This could be relevant when examining the effect of traditional family value systems and perceived resources available to the gay child (Waldner and McGruder 1999).

Disclosure to Siblings

Often, the first family member gay males and lesbians come out to is a sibling. Several studies have suggested that siblings are usually told before parents (Jones 1978; Devine 1984; Cramer and Roach 1988). Jones states, “The first reaching out is likely to be to those who will be loving and accepting” (1978: 29). Usually brothers and sisters share a common background and this may make disclosure easier because there is a certain level of comfort. Because gay and lesbian members often disclose to certain members first there is a chance that support for the decision can be built or lost. Jones (1978) found that often, to the dismay of the disclosing member, siblings respond with anger and confusion. The reactions of certain members to the disclosure can have an effect on how others handle the situation. Thus, siblings can have a tremendous impact on the way other family members view the disclosure and its effects on the family. Communication within the family network is an essential element in trying to gain acceptance for the gay or lesbian member (Oswald 2000).

Because disclosure carries certain tangible risks, the decision of to whom to disclose is very significant. Confiding in family members who are perceived to be sympathetic may help mediate repercussions of disclosure throughout the family network. Minority group disclosure, as noted earlier, carries certain risks that are not as

heavily associated with white homosexual disclosure. African-American members are more likely to disclose to a female family member than a male. Therefore, a positive affective relationship with sisters may increase the likelihood of disclosure of sexual orientation (Mays et al. 1998). It is clear that “closeness” (Weston 1991) is used by gay males and lesbians in determining who would be the best person to confide in. Not everyone is willing to test the familial climate, but generally siblings are the first to be told (Jones 1978; Devine 1984).

Disclosure to Parents

Parental reactions to an offspring’s homosexuality vary from situation to situation. However, several researchers have found patterns and developed their own reaction scales (Robinson et al. 1989; Ben-Ari 1995; Williamson 1998). Generally parents progress through stages of shock, denial, guilt, anger, and acceptance (Robinson et al. 1989). Ben-Ari (1995) added the additional reactions of rejection and acknowledgement to Robinson’s (1989) list of stages. Williamson (1998) reported on the unpredictable nature of familial reaction by listing five patterns of emotional response (shock/disbelief/embarrassment, anger/rejection, fear/worry/anxiety, sadness/sorrow, hopefulness/love/acceptance) but refrained from stating any predictable order to their occurrence. However, he did report that shock and disbelief were the most common initial responses, occurring in half of all disclosure cases.

A study of gay males indicated that most parent/son relationships are

initially strained after disclosure (Cramer and Roach 1988). Another study noted that a lesbian's father responded to her disclosure with a week of silence before engaging in extended periods of crying (Oswald 2000). This coincides with another common reaction- a grieving period for the loss of the offspring's heterosexual identity (Mays et al. 1998). Devine (1984) discusses this phase in his analysis of the family response system. The first response of the family is called *subliminal awareness*. In this phase, parents suspect that a child may be gay and look for behavior that may key them in to their child's orientation. This stage is usually very counterproductive because the parents are threatened by fear of having a gay child and the child is threatened by the fear of rejection.

Disclosure signals the end of subliminal awareness and triggers the second stage- *impact*. Impact is the crisis stage. The family tries to find ways to handle the information and often reacts negatively. While relatively uncommon, physical violence against the disclosing member is a very real threat (Meyers 1982). A study by Hetrick and Martin (1987) indicates that up to seventeen percent of adolescents seeking social or psychiatric assistance after disclosure were physically assaulted by a parent. It is in this impact stage that a parent's anger, especially a father's, is most likely to be expressed violently (Meyers 1982; Savin-Williams 1994; Savin-Williams and Dube 1998). Examples of these incidents are often found in narratives written by gays and lesbians (Heron 1983, Weston 1991) Often, during the impact stage, distance between the disclosing

member and the rest of the family is sought through threats or requests (Divine 1984).

The third stage, *adjustment*, reveals an attempt by the family to keep the information a family secret. This is a temporary solution that does not resolve the issue at hand. Education and open communication, leading to the acknowledgment of the gay member's orientation, are necessary for closure. However, many never make it out of the adjustment phase and the conflict is never resolved.

If the family can progress past the adjustment phase, *resolution* begins. It is in this stage that the family mourns the loss of the previous role of the son or daughter who has disclosed. The final stage is called *integration*. From then on the family will build a new role for the child, integrating his or her homosexual orientation into the identity (Devine 1984).

The road to acceptance within the family can be long, and outright rejection occurs often. After an initial negative response, relationships usually improve (Cramer and Roach 1988). The process does take longer for certain families and certain members, and patience is needed when dealing with such a situation (Savin-Williams and Dube 1998). In reactions over time, mothers and fathers differ only with respect to guilt and acceptance- fathers expressed more guilt longer and mothers were quicker to accept their gay child (Ben-Ari 1995).

Theoretical Framework

Qualitative research designs are well suited to allow for development of a theoretical framework during the data analysis process. This inductive process is known as grounded theory. However, a preliminary idea of relevant theories can be drawn from the existing literature on the topic (Rudestam and Newton 2001). Below, I will discuss several theoretical “branches” that can aid in the understanding of familial responses to a member’s disclosure: Goffman’s concept of stigma; family systems theory; and a familial application of Durkheim’s concept of anomie.

Stigma

The idea of stigma was explored in detail by Erving Goffman. According to Goffman, stigma is “an attribute that is deeply discrediting, ’ however, ‘it should be seen that a language of relationships, not attributes, is really needed. An attribute that stigmatizes one type of possessor can confirm the usualness of another, and therefore is neither creditable nor discreditable as a thing in itself” (1963: 3). Thus, the stigma arises not from the attribute, but from the relationship between “attribute and stereotype” (Goffman 1963: 4). Stigmas often become associated with negative stereotypical images that “inevitably dehumanize the population they presumably represent” (Hammersmith 1987: 175).

While stigma directly affects the stigmatized person, a person associated with that individual can feel the effects of the stigma as well. Goffman states, “The problems faced by stigmatized persons spread out in waves, but of diminishing intensity” (1963:

30). Being associated with a stigmatized individual can have an impact on the “credit” or “reputation” of an individual. When considered in the context of exchange theory this has major implications. Exchange theory, developed in part by Georg Simmel and George Homans, is based on principles of economics. Needs are either met or left unfulfilled by a series of exchanges. Behaviors and actions made towards fulfilling these needs are seen as an exchange (Homans 1958). Attached to the exchange process is the idea of social capital, or the relations between people that facilitate action (Coleman 1990). In the situation of disclosure of homosexuality and the associated stigmas, the capital being exchanged is social capital. An association with a stigmatized individual, such as a homosexual, is likely to cause a decrease in the value of social capital, therefore causing the person’s attempted exchange to be viewed as less valuable. Goffman states, “The issue is that in certain circumstances the social identity of those an individual is with can be used as a source of information concerning his own social identity, the assumption being that he is what the others are” (1963: 47).

Due to the highly-transferable concept of stigma, within one’s own peer group “an individual cannot question anti-gay stereotype, humor, or prejudice-or try to educate one’s self on the topic-without jeopardizing one’s own reputation (Hammersmith 1987: 175). This fear of the association, combined with the hidden nature of homosexuality, helps to create a sense of social distancing from the subject. Therefore, when the issue does arise, as in the context of the family, those who are now forced to address the issue are unprepared for the discourse (Hammersmith 1987).

Family Systems Theory:

Family systems theorists approach the family unit as a system, “a set of objects together with relationships between the objects and between their attributes” (Broderick and Smith 1979: 112). Boundaries are maintained and external input and elements that are seen as “hostile to system goals and policies are filtered out, while those seen as beneficial to the pursuit of system goals may be actively sought and incorporated” (Broderick and Smith 1979: 112). Members of the family may be subtly (or aggressively) encouraged to pursue exposure to certain outside contacts or information. On the other hand, members may also be warned against such experiences. In extreme cases, family members who are deemed hostile to the goals of the family may be expelled from the system (Broderick and Smith 1979).

Looking at the family as a system allows us to examine the impact of input and feedback on the system. Input is a stimulus from the outside environment or a new, unexpected development inside the family. The input that passes through the system is governed by rules of transformation, or “family rules” (Broderick and Smith 1979: 114). These rules have been developed to handle most input and situations that arise. However, there are instances when there are no rules to handle new input. When this occurs, a system is said to “lack the requisite variety to process the input appropriately” (Broderick and Smith 1979: 114). In such instances, a family may develop new rules or responses that are suitable (a process called morphogenesis), or it may become immobilized and break down. One of the most insufficient responses is to rely on a residual response (a sort of, “if all else fails” approach). Studies of child abuse show that this may be

involved in these cases. Parents lack the requisite variety to handle a behavior, they respond with the only fallback response in their repertoire, violence (Broderick and Smith 1979).

Familial Anomie

Emile Durkheim's discussion of anomie and suicide can help provide possible insight into the dynamic of families dealing with the issue of homosexuality. Anomie occurs when there is an "absence of effective guidelines in society" (Hurst 2000: 14). Durkheim believed that "morality and the presence of rules are necessary as a basis for the civilization of a society and for the happiness of individuals" (Hurst 2000:14). While these guidelines need not be overly strict (as in a totalitarian government), they must show individuals how to pursue their goals while being sensitive to the needs and rights of others. Durkheim used the phrase "anomic suicide" to describe the kind of suicide that occurs when individuals have no moral ceiling or structural guidelines. An example given comes in the form of industry. He states "...if, among the suicides of industry employers were distinguished from workmen, for the former are probably most stricken by the state of anomy" (Durkheim 2000: 49). Their suicides "...result from man's activity lacking regulation and constant sufferings" (Durkheim 2000: 49). The anomie that results from their lives is, in Durkheim's findings, such a strong force that many choose to end their lives rather than continue their "endless pursuit" (Durkheim 2000:48).

Robert Merton applied the theoretical framework of anomie to the study of crime. He argues that there are two elements social structure and culture that are important to our understanding of deviant behavior. "The first consists of culturally defined goals,

purposes, and interests. It comprises a frame of aspirational reference' while 'The second phase of the social structure defines, regulates and controls the acceptable modes of achieving these goals' (Merton 2000). Therefore, there are goals that are defined culturally, such as the accumulation of wealth, and there are socially acceptable means to attain these goals, such as education and hard work. A socially unacceptable means to accumulating wealth would be committing crimes, such as robbery, which are seen as deviant. It is fairly easy to see how this can be applied to the practice of coming out of the closet as gay or lesbian in a heterosexually oriented culture. While heterosexual romantic relationships are rarely seen as "goals" that parents encourage their children to achieve, they are seen as norms that are expected to be met. Families, while not explicitly viewing them as goals, do have expectations for their sons and daughters, and these expectations often involve the eventual marriage to a partner of the opposite sex. Our social structure provides the institutional means to attaining these ends (heterosexual relationships) through the institution of marriage, which is defined by the federal government as only occurring between a man and a woman. It also provides motivation for people to follow these norms through insurance benefits and tax breaks. Merton states, "Insofar as one of the most general functions of social organization is to provide a basis for calculability and regularity of behavior, it is increasingly limited in effectiveness as these elements of the structure become disassociated. At the extreme, predictability virtually disappears and what may be properly termed cultural chaos or anomie intervenes" (2000: 84).

The family is the first place most individuals become acquainted with societal norms and guidelines. While family structures and relationships are as diverse as the individual members themselves, they are all influenced by the dominant ideologies of religion, government, and education that shape our society. This has been problematic for the issue of sexuality, especially homosexuality. Consistent with Durkheim's views on the need for guidelines, Devine (1984) presented five explanations as to why the disclosure of homosexuality has such a tremendous impact on the family structure. He states that it is a challenge because:

(1) there are no rules in the family system appropriate to handle the behavior, (2) There are no roles in the family specific to the issue into which the family members can fit, (3) there is no constructive language available to describe the issue, (4) there are strong negative family and cultural proscriptions against homosexual behavior, (5) the cohesive element, regulative structure and themes within the family system become critical forces against adaptation (1984: 9).

Because a homosexual identity disclosure is such an unexpected occurrence, there are "no rules" that can guide the disclosure process. It is new ground for both the discloser and the family. The predefined roles of *mother, father, son, daughter, brother or sister* are challenged when a member adds a new dimension to these roles by claiming a homosexual identity. These roles, established by dominant structures such as religion and government are so strongly implanted in our family systems that this new challenge can result in a state of familial anomie in which "old morals have evaporated, but new ones have not yet replaced them" (Hurst 2000:33). The expectations that family members held for the gay individual no longer hold true, creating a state of confusion and

misunderstanding as the family tries to incorporate this new identity into its previous perception. This negotiation of familial anomie is quite similar to what family systems theorists describe as morphogenesis. The cultural lag that exists when positive gay identities clash with traditional values can be clearly seen in families dealing with the disclosure of homosexuality by one of its members.

The lack of shared language within the family structure with which members can communicate ideas and feelings is limited by social norms, which Devine calls “strong negative family and cultural proscriptions against homosexual behavior” (1984: 9). A field study by Theresa Montini (2000) examines the concepts of “closed” and “open awareness contexts” when dealing with homosexual identities. Her openness about her lesbian identity while living in Honolulu, Hawaii (a closed awareness context) was met with resistance from the members of her community. She found that her disclosures were unexpected and caused breakdowns in the ordinarily smooth and routine contours of social interaction, resulting in those to whom I disclosed trying to repair the encounter” (2000: 3). When she ignored the societal “rule” of keeping her lesbian identity to herself, the people to whom she disclosed often apologized for intruding in her private life and retreated from the topic.

This is not uncommon in familial situations. Rather than trying to bridge the communication gap between the individuals and come to a common understanding of the situation, family members may often avoid any conversation dealing with that aspect of an individual’s identity. In more extreme cases, family

members will disassociate the gay individual altogether. This breakdown of family interaction occurs when the system lacks the requisite variety of responses. One of the most common fears held by gay and lesbian youth is being rejected by family members, if not being cut off from family relationships altogether (Weston 1991). This is consistent with Devine's assertion that "regulative structure and themes within the family system become critical forces against adaptation" (1984: 9).

Montini (2000:7) came to the conclusion that people will defend the closed awareness context (that follows established guidelines against homosexuality) "with a ferociousness that clarified the contagiousness of stigma and the inevitability of social death for anyone foolish enough to persist" in trying to disclose their homosexual identity. Social death is defined as "complete exclusion from social membership" (Montini 2000:5). The countless instances of familial exclusion provide prime examples of social death occurring within the family after no repairs could be made to the anomic situation spurred by disclosure.

Based on the literature reviewed above, the following research questions were developed in order to guide the research process and address gaps in the body of literature developed by previous research studies.

1. Why do lesbians choose to disclose their sexual orientation to siblings?
2. How do siblings experience the coming out process of a lesbian sister (i.e. how do they react)?
3. What variables influence these reactions?
4. What happens during the time following disclosure and how does the disclosure affect family interaction?

Chapter Three: Methodology

This study utilizes qualitative research methods. Qualitative researchers “explain how people attach meaning to events and learn to see events from multiple perspectives” (Neuman 2000: 144). The highly emotional context of sexuality in the family lends itself to a more descriptive study that allows participants to express responses to questions in their own words, rather than being made to choose from pre-determined answers. It also allows the readers to examine the results in a format with which they may be more familiar. As Lincoln and Guba state, “if you want people to understand better than they otherwise might, provide them the information in the form in which they usually experience it” (1985: 120). This chapter will provide an examination of the research methods used to conduct this study. Obtaining consent, ensuring confidentiality, obtaining the sample, data collection, trustworthiness, and data analysis will be discussed, followed by an examination of the limitations of the study.

Interviews with both lesbian participants and their siblings were conducted in order to gather the data included in this study. Interviewing both groups assured that multiple perspectives on experiences shared by members of the same family could be expressed. This is crucial in understanding the role that family dynamics has on the coming out process. It allowed sibling participants to express their feelings on why the sister chose to disclose to them, what impact family dynamics had on their reaction, and

what impact their reaction had on family interaction. It also allowed the lesbian participant to share her views on her family and express why coming out to her sibling (and other family members) was important.

Consent and Confidentiality

As with all studies that deal with human participants, consent and confidentiality were issues that had to be addressed. Completion of an Informed Consent form by each participant was required by the VCU Institutional Review Board (IRB). An assessment of consent material (Appendix I) was conducted before each interview to be assured the subjects understood the purpose of both the study and the consent form. The forms given to lesbian and sibling participants were identical. There was no way to identify the sexual orientation of the participant by examining the form or signature. The subjects were asked to read and sign the form a few minutes before the interview began. They were also encouraged to ask questions about the consent form. Any other questions or concerns about the study were also addressed at that time.

Several of the interview questions asked participants to reflect on events that occurred and feelings they experienced in the past that dealt with the coming out process. As a precautionary measure guarding against a negative emotional reaction by a participant, the name and contact information of an AASECT (American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists) certified counselor was provided during the pre-interview briefing.

Insuring confidentiality was a crucial aspect of the study. Participants may have been concerned about their names being associated with a study dealing with homosexuality and the family. In order to ensure confidentiality, at the beginning of each interview, each participant was asked to read a number or letter that was recorded onto the audio tape. That number or letter was also recorded on a paper list that associated each individual participant's number or letter with their name and their sibling's name. The list was needed to keep track of who had been interviewed and which interviews were still needed. After both participants were interviewed, the paper list was destroyed, and none of the participant's personal information remained connected with the study. After the taped interviews were transcribed into electronic text files, the audio tapes were destroyed as well.

The Sample

A modified snowball sample was used to find willing participants. Snowball samples make it easier to gain access to groups of people who are connected by a common factor (Neuman 2000: 199). They are also useful in gathering information from people who may be part of a network that is difficult to recognize, such as sexual minorities, skydivers, or undercover narcotics agents. The technique works by starting with a few people who are willing to participate and then getting them to name others whom they think would also be willing to participate. Those people name others, and the cycle continues, causing the sample to grow.

Finding people who are willing to be honest and open about a topic that is often viewed as taboo can be difficult. The process began by making contact with members of the lesbian community through local groups and organizations. Local sexual minority student groups from area colleges and universities were used as the primary source of contacts. The local chapter of PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) was also contacted and asked to contribute possible contacts. PFLAG has been a popular choice of past researchers interested in studying the relatives of sexual minorities. Once a person expressed interest in participating in the study, she was asked to contact her sibling(s) in order to determine if they were also willing to participate. Several also suggested friends they thought would be interested as well. If a pair seemed willing to participate, their contact information was recorded. Then the process of setting up separate, in-person interviews with the lesbian participant and their sibling began.

Data Collection

The original proposal for this study called for twenty interviews - ten to be conducted with lesbian participants and ten to be conducted with a sibling of each. Over the course of the data collection process, interviews became increasingly difficult to complete. Often, potential participants were too busy for interviews, thanks to school and other activities. My schedule often conflicted with those of potential participants and many appointments were cancelled and rescheduled. On several occasions I drove long distances, 100 miles or more, to get some of the interviews. Eventually the IRB closure

deadline approached and the final sample size was cut to sixteen interviews, eight pairs instead of ten.

The sixteen interviews were conducted over a 10 month period between May, 2002 and February, 2003. There was no predetermined area where all interviews had to take place. The option of meeting in a private setting was always offered, however most participants were concerned with convenience over privacy. Essentially, I went to wherever the participants were able to meet. Most interviews took place in private study rooms in university libraries, while others were in dorm rooms, dorm study lounges, coffee shops, restaurants and hotel lobbies.

Participants did not need to be interviewed in any particular order. Siblings did not need to be interviewed before lesbian participants or vice versa. For example, the first interview conducted was with a lesbian participant, yet her sibling was one of the last people interviewed, about ten months later. There were also no restrictions that prohibited the participant who was interviewed first from discussing the study with her or his sibling.

The interviews were recorded on tape, and notes were made of non-verbal communications such as shoulder shrugging and expressive hand gestures. The average length for an interview was about forty minutes. The shortest interview lasted around twenty-five minutes while the longest lasted well over an hour. Each participant was asked a series of questions (Appendix II-a, II-b), starting with basic demographic information. Questions about religiosity, familial relationships, and the disclosure process were asked of each participant. Some of the questions for lesbian and sibling

participants were exactly the same, but many were not. For example, in the section about parents, both groups of respondents were asked how they expected their parents to react and how they actually reacted. However, in the section about disclosure, lesbians (Appendix II-a) were asked how they expected their sibling to react to disclosure, while non-lesbian siblings (Appendix II-b) were asked about their reaction to the disclosure.

Trustworthiness

While quantitative researchers' work is scrutinized on the basis of external validity, internal validity, reliability and objectivity, naturalistic (including qualitative) researchers have developed terms of their own that both coincide and explain fundamental differences with the checks placed on quantitative research (Lincoln and Guba 1985, Rudestam and Newton 2001). Lincoln and Guba (1985) discuss four criteria for ensuring trustworthiness in a naturalistic inquiry: truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality.

Truth value, or credibility, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), can be met through several different techniques. One way is through "testing for misinformation introduced by distortions of the self" (Linclon and Guba 1985: 301). This simply means that researchers must understand their own expectations concerning the study in order that they may not interfere with the data collection. Of course, it is perfectly normal for researchers to have expectations - they are they are the basis for our hypotheses. However, as stated by Linclon and Guba, when analyzing data, if the investigator "makes interpretations that are continuously predictable from the original formulation, then that

investigator has either not spent enough time on the site or has persisted against all logic in his or her ethnocentric posture” (1985: 302). If a respondent confirmed or denied a hypothesis, the inquiry did not end. Rather, respondents were encouraged to reflect on anything they could remember about the events concerning disclosure. In other words, I expected to find certain things, but I also expected the unexpected.

In guarding against misinformation produced by the respondent, the researcher’s main goals would be to avoid selective memory, misunderstanding of the questions, and situated motives, or attempts by the respondent to please the researcher by saying what they believe is the desired answer rather than simply answering honestly (Lincoln and Guba 1985: 302). One function of collecting separate interviews with lesbian and sibling participants was the idea that these differing perspectives would serve as a check against selective memory. All participants knew that some of the same questions were asked of both samples. This was to encourage all participants to try and remember the situations as accurately and answer questions as honestly as possible. If a sibling respondent reported that he or she had a very positive reaction to his or her sister’s disclosure, yet the lesbian participant reported that her sibling reacted with a week of silence, followed by gradual acceptance, then that should be noted. This could also be viewed as a method of triangulation, or “soliciting data from multiple and different sources as a means of corroborating evidence and illuminating a theme or theory” (Rudestam and Newton 2001: 100).

Questions were worded simply to reduce the risk that a participant would misunderstand what an inquiry meant. Some questions asked about situations involving

“parents, family, and friends.” If a participant answered the question about parents and family, for example, a prompt of “What about your friends?” may have been used to finish up the question. If a participant was totally unsure what the question meant, it was simplified as much as possible, without leading the participant in a particular response. In an effort to counter any attempts by respondents’ desires to answer as they believed I wanted them to, all participants were encouraged before each interview began to answer the questions as accurately and honestly as possible, and assured that there were no right or wrong answers. The fact that there were no right or wrong answers was also highlighted during the recruitment process for obtaining the sample. Along with guarding against situated motives, it was also used as a method of building trust between the investigator and the potential participants. Letting potential participants know my background and being honest about the motives and goals of the study was something that was necessary in order to collect a sample. Homosexuality is a sensitive issue for many people, and those who were interested in participating were assured that the study was in no way an attempt to pass judgment on their reactions or their family situation.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis calls for an in-depth examination of notes taken from the interviews. This is an inductive process that begins with observations and moves towards more abstract ideas and generalizations (Neuman 2000: 420). Upon completion, the interviews were transcribed into electronic data files. HyperResearch, a qualitative data analysis software program was used to aid in a three-step coding process (Neuman 2000).

An initial review of interviews began the open-coding process. This was essentially a first pass through the rough data. Since the interviews were broken up into a series of questions that followed a general theme, the first coding sweep was fairly simple and the information in each code was quite broad. For example, one code for the sibling participants was “Sibling’s reaction.” The answers to this question varied across respondents: however there were some similarities that could be seen from this initial sweep.

The second step to the analysis was the axial coding process. Here, initial answers and themes were compared with each other and combined into more complete categories. For example, the code of “Sibling reaction” would be broken down further into codes such as “Sib react shock” or “Sib react supportive”. The axial coding of “Sibling family religious?” yielded such secondary codes as “Sib rel Yes,” “Sib rel spiritual,” and “Sib rel Christian but we’re not real crazy.” These secondary codes then became variables for helping to examine the effects of the respondent’s religiosity on the coming out process.

The third and final coding process was selective coding. Relationships were drawn between the themes detected and the theories developed in previous literature. In a sense, this is where the data all came together to present a clearer picture of sibling reactions within the context of the family setting. Previous studies have presented models for familial (mostly parental) reaction, and those models were compared to the data I had collected and analyzed.

Limitations

These methods allowed me to obtain a sample, but were not without limitations. In general, individuals who are willing to talk to a researcher about a family member's homosexuality would probably be more accepting of gays and lesbians than those who would be unwilling to discuss it. Members of organizations like university gay/straight alliances and PFLAG may have more positive attitudes concerning homosexuality. Another factor that may have skewed the sample is the fact that the siblings whose lesbian sister would be comfortable asking to participate may not be truly representative of the total sibling population. The siblings who were asked would more likely be those who would be most comfortable discussing their sister's lesbian identity. Overall, I believe the sibling participants had positive reactions and attitudes concerning their lesbian sister. A more accurate and representative sample would have included siblings who had less positive reactions.

The issue of parental reactions and attitudes posed another set of limitations. While participants discussed their parents' reactions, the parents themselves were not interviewed. Thus, the parents were not allowed to speak for themselves, and their unique perspectives were not addressed. Sibling participants were asked about discussions with their parents after disclosure; however, hearing what parents had to say about this interaction would have provided an additional view on how and if siblings helped them deal with their lesbian daughters' disclosure.

Another limitation is the lack of diversity in the sample. The participants were all white, all reported that their class status was somewhere between lower-middle and

upper-middle class, and almost all participants had some college education. Also, while some of the participants had moved several times, most participants grew up in the state of Virginia. At the time of the interviews, most resided in the state capital of Richmond, a conservative, religious city, and all lived somewhere in Virginia. Unfortunately, time and budget constraints made it impossible to obtain a larger sample which would probably been more diverse.

One unexpected limitation had to do with the age of the lesbian participants and the ages at which they disclosed their sexual orientation to their family members. While some had disclosed several years before, during their early teenage years, many had only came out within the past year. One specific aim of the study was to better understand how reactions and attitudes concerning a sister's lesbian identity changed over time. The relatively short timeframe between disclosure and participation in this study made that a more difficult task.

Chapter Four: Results

In this section, I will provide a review of the findings of my research. I have organized my findings into three headings based on my research questions. Family Relationships Before Disclosure presents the findings that are relevant to sibling relationships and parent-child interaction. The second section, Disclosure, presents the results based on questions about the actual event of disclosure and the initial reactions. Family Relationships Since Disclosure reviews how, and if, familial relationships were changed after lesbian participants disclosed their sexual orientation. The names used in this discussion are not the real names of the participants and all quotations come directly from the transcribed interviews.

Family Relationships Before Disclosure

The general sample was made up of sixteen people (Table 1 illustrates the results the demographic information on the participants and their families). Eight of those identified as lesbian and made up the lesbian sample. Ages of the lesbian participants ranged from 18 to 24, while the average age was 20. They all identified as Caucasian, and all but one had completed some part of their college education.

Table 1: Lesbian and Sibling Sample Demographics

Pair: Lesbian (age) Sibling(age)	Raised by:	Other siblings	Social Class	Education	Hometown (* =moved several times)	Extended Family in Area	Family Religious	Yourself Religious
Dana (21) Rich (24)	Both parents	No	Middle Class	Dana- Some College Rich- Bachelors Degree	Suburban*	Yes	No	Dana- Spiritual Rich- No
Kristi (20) Ashley (18)	Both parents	Yes: Older Sister	Middle Class	Kristi- Some College Ashley- HS Diploma	Small town*	No	Yes	Kristi- Yes Ashley- Somewhat
Faith (20) Anthony (21)	Both parents	No	Middle Class	Faith- Some College Anthony- Assoc. Degree	Rural	Yes	Somewhat	Faith- No Anthony- No
Wendy (20) Heather (24)	Both parents	Yes: Younger Brother	Middle Class	Wendy- Some College Heather- Some College	Small town*	Yes	No (Spiritual)	Wendy- Spiritual Heather- No
Kendra (18) Jackie (19)	Both parents	Yes: Younger Sister	Middle Class	Kendra- Some College Jackie- Some College	Suburban	No	No	Kendra- Somewhat Jackie- No
Rose (22) Adam (18)	Mother since ages 10, 16	Yes: Older Sister	Middle Class	Rose- Some College Adam- HS Senior	Suburban*	No	Yes	Rose- Somewhat Adam- Somewhat
Carol (20) Marcus (29)	Mother + Stepfather	No	Middle Class	Carol- HS Diploma Marcus- Some College	Suburban	No	No	Carol- No Marcus- Yes
Cindy (19) Jody (18)	Both parents	Yes, Older Brother	Middle Class	Cindy- Some College Jody- Some College	Suburban	No	Yes	Cindy- Yes Jody- Yes

One sibling of each of the lesbian participants was included in what was called the “sibling sample.” The sibling population was made up of four females and four males. Their ages ranged from 18 to 29, and their average age was 24. All the sibling participants also identified as Caucasian. Three sibling participants had earned college degrees while three others were currently enrolled in college. The other two participants planned to begin college in the upcoming fall semester.

Of the eight pairs of respondents, six pairs were raised by both of their biological parents. Five of the pairs had one other sibling, while three families had only the two siblings being interviewed. Only three pairs of respondents reported having a large extended family in the area(s) where they grew up. Half of the pairs interviewed recalled that their families moved several times.

Relationship with Parents

Most participants reported having a close relationship with their parents, though this finding was more common with sibling participants than with lesbian participants. Parents were not overly strict when it came to gender role conformity and were fairly open when it came to discussions of sex. However, parents were not open when it came to discussing sexual orientation (see Table 2 for an illustration of and parent-child relationships before disclosure).

Table 2: Family Relationships Before Disclosure

Pair: Lesbian Sibling	Relationship With Parents Before Disclosure	Parents Establish Gender Restrictions?	Parents Discuss Sex?	Parents Discuss Sexual Orientation in Sex Talk?	Parents Have Any Idea?	Relationship With Sibling Before Disclosure?	Sibling (Interviewed) Have Any Idea?
Dana Rich	Dana- mixed Rich-close	Yes	Dana-Yes Rich-No	No	Mother Knew	Not Close	None
Kristi Ashley	Kristi-close Ashley-close	No	Kristi-No Ashley -No	No (Pos opinions)	Some	Close	Some
Faith Anthony	Faith-close Anthony-close	No	Faith-Yes Anthony-No	No (Neg opinions)	Some	Close	Some
Wendy Heather	Wendy-close Heather-close	No	Wendy-No Heather-Yes	No	Mother Knew	Close	Some
Kendra Jackie	Kendra-mixed Jackie-close	No	Kendra-No Jackie-No	No (Neg opinions)	Some	Close	None
Rose Adam	Rose-ok Adam-close	No	Rose-Yes Adam-Yes	No	Some	Close	None
Carol Marcus	Carol-mixed Marcus-close	No	Carol-No Marcus-Yes	No	Some	Not Close	Some
Cindy Jody	Cindy-ok Jody-mixed	No	Cindy-No Jody-No	No (Neg opinions)	Some	Close	Some

All participants were asked to describe their relationship with their parents (lesbian participants were asked about their relationship before disclosure took place). Responses generally fell into three categories: close, ok (average), or mixed (closer to one parent than the other). The answers given by lesbian participants varied much more than those of their siblings. Seven of eight siblings reported having a close relationship with both parents. Close relationships were defined by responses with words like supportive, open, or strong. Rich reported being “very good friends with Mom and Dad.” The eighth sibling, Jody, reported having a mixed relationship, feeling closer to her mother, but having a more distant relationship with her father.

Only three lesbian participants reported being close to their parents before their disclosure. Three explained that they had “mixed” relationships with their parents, feeling closer to one parent than the other. Kendra and Carol both stated that they were closer to their mothers. Dana recalled being “Daddy’s little girl,” but during her late teens, when it came to her mother, she stated, “I didn’t want to talk to her. I didn’t want to see her.” Two lesbian participants reported having ok relationships with their parents. Ok responses were defined by non-descript answers that had a more neutral tone. As Rose recalled, “It was ok. It was kind of rocky.” Perhaps Cindy described an ok relationship best when she said, “It’s really about as generic as you can get as far as parents and kids go.”

Participants were also asked to describe the way parents handled certain situations that might be considered important when examining the “traditional” attitudes of the

family. Participants were asked about how their parents felt male and female children ought to behave, and if their parents ever discussed sexuality with them, specifically sexual orientation. When asked what their parents felt male and female children ought to be like or behave, Rich stated that his parents “set up pretty traditional gender roles.” His sister Dana, agreed partially, saying “They weren’t very strict with gender, but they drew lines for sure.” While she was encouraged to play sports, she recalled her father encouraging her not to “lose [my] femininity and to be ladylike.” They were the only respondents who reported any sense of “rules” for gender being established. In all but one of the families, at least one sibling in each pair mentioned being able to play with the kinds of toys they wanted, be they Barbie dolls or GI Joes, or play sports if they chose. The one pair of siblings who did not report this did not say they were discouraged from doing so, but just made no mention of it. One sibling participant, Heather, stated “We were free game for whatever we wanted to do. I was the tomboy and my sister [Wendy] was the prissy girl.” Even though her sister considered her “prissy”, Wendy still wanted to play little league baseball. Their mother challenged the league’s rule that all participants had to wear a protective cup, even threatening legal action before Wendy was finally allowed to play.

All respondents were allowed to wear the types of clothes they liked and have the hairstyles they wanted. The only mention of restrictions concerning this came from Kristi and Jackie. Kristi stated, “My parents knew I liked my hair short and they didn’t care. They bought me the clothes I liked. Except when we went to church - then I had to wear a dress.” While Kendra made no mention of her parents complaining about her

style of dress, her sister Jackie mentioned that her mother “used to make comments on it for the longest time,” and that “she wants her [Kendra] to dress more feminine.”

Discussions about sex between parents and children can be rather uncomfortable for both parties. Half of the lesbian participants recalled talking to their parents about sex. Three of the sibling participants reported this also. However, both siblings from the same families did not always report this. For example, Faith, whose mother is a nurse practitioner who worked in a gynecologist’s office, said that she and her mother “talked about sex a lot, not so much about the act of sex,” but that her mother “talked about puberty forever.” Her brother Anthony, however, did not report having talked to their parents about sex.

Of those parents who did discuss sex with their children, none were said to have addressed the topic of sexual orientation directly. Two pairs of siblings mentioned having a gay relative. Kristi and Ashley had an aunt who was a lesbian, and Rose and Adam had a gay uncle who died of AIDS in the early 1980s. Even with this presence, their parents never mentioned much about homosexuality. Rose explained that the “only conversation we had about homosexuality” came after she and her siblings inquired about her uncle’s death. Kristi “knew that their [her parents] views on gay people were good” and that “if something [about gay rights] came on the news they would be supportive.” Both Kristi and Ashley remember Ashley jokingly telling their mother she was gay and then asking if she still loved her. Their mother replied, “Of course I still love you, I just want to make sure you are gay.” Despite their positive views on gays and lesbians, her parents never discussed sex or sexual orientation in any detail with either of them.

While Kristi and Ashley's parents expressed a positive view of homosexuality, most parents either made no mention of homosexuality or made it known that they were against it. Six sibling participants could not remember their parents ever discussing sexual orientation with them before their sister came out. Three lesbian participants could not remember discussing this with their parents. The lesbian participants were, however, more likely to report their parents expressing negative views of homosexuality. For example, Faith stated, "When someone was out [of the closet] on TV shows he [her father] would always change the channel and be like 'Why do they have to be so in your face?'" She believed her parents "had this extreme idea of what homosexual people were [like]." Cindy and her sister Jody reported similar experiences. Jody recalled, "It was always just implied that being gay was wrong. My parents wouldn't exactly make gay-bashing remarks, but they would make it pretty clear that it was wrong. Like, if they saw it in a movie, that [person] was the bad person in the movie." Her sister, Cindy, stated she "kind of knew they were always against it just from the way they talked about gays and lesbians." Wendy told this story that described her mother's attitudes concerning sexual orientation:

About a year before I realized I was gay, I played an April fool's joke on my mom and said I was gay. She was kind of like, "Ok (pause). Well, umm, if that's what you want I can accept you." And I was like, "I'm just joking, April fools!" She goes, "Oh, thank goodness!" and "Guys are great, you'll have so much fun with them." After that she started making more comments [about me dating males].

Though Wendy's mother responded with initial acceptance, her relief when told it was a joke was obvious.

Sibling Relationships

Growing up with siblings can be, for some, a great experience. For others, siblings are a constant source of distress. For the participants in this study, the general consensus was that growing up with siblings was a little bit of both. All but three of the sibling participants were older than their lesbian sisters. Three of four brothers who were interviewed were older than their sisters. The largest age difference was nine years, between the older Marcus and his sister Carol. The next largest gap was four years between Wendy and her older sister Heather, and Rose and her younger brother Adam.

Only two of the lesbian participants reported that they were “not close” with the sibling being interviewed before disclosure. Carol reported that she and her step-brother Marcus “got along fine, but he was nine years older.” Six of the lesbian participants described their relationship with the sibling being interviewed as close. The code “close” was defined by responses that included the actual word “close,” as well as mentioning they considered the sibling a friend, or hung out often. Several lesbians and sibling participants mentioned small age differences when reporting close relationships. This is not to say, however, that they did not have their differences. Both lesbian and sibling responses were peppered with adjectives like “typical” and “normal.” Some reported picking on each other and trying to get the other in trouble with their parents. A few noted that they had some major conflicts, but they viewed these as part of the growing-up process.

Since all but one of the lesbian participants and all but two of the sibling participants had been away at college for at least some portion of their lives, distance

definitely played a role in their relationships. One sibling, Rich, reported that distance improved what had been a conflict-filled childhood with his sister, Dana. He had been in college for a few years and stated that “things had actually gotten better when she went to college as far as the relationship went.” For others, distance proved to be a strain. Heather had been out of the house for about two years before her sister Wendy moved out. Heather recalled that during that period, “We kept in contact, but we weren’t very close.” Wendy also recalled that their relationship “wasn’t as strong” during the time apart. Others mentioned distance as a problem because they did not get to see or talk to their siblings as often.

Five lesbian participants had one other sibling who was not interviewed. Two, Kristi and Rose, had older sisters, while Kendra had a younger sister. Cindy had an older brother, and Wendy had a younger brother. Wendy reported being very close with her younger brother, though her older sister Heather said she was not as close to him, due to the nine year age difference. Both Cindy and her sister Jody report not being very close with their older brother. The others, Kristi, Rose, and Kendra, report having fairly good relationships, but not being as close as with their siblings who were interviewed.

Previous Knowledge

The majority of siblings interviewed reported having some idea that their sister was a lesbian (see Table 2). Anthony said his sister “seemed to like guys” and even “dated a couple of them.” However, he always thought there was a possibility she might be gay “because she was kind of tomboyish.” He also theorized that, considering the

openly homophobic attitude of their father, perhaps “she never thought of [dating women] as a possibility.” Interestingly, this statement was echoed by Faith when she discussed coming to terms with her own sexual orientation. Two participants stated having a more general idea about their sister, while Jody and Heather pointed to certain incidents that clued them in. Jody, a year younger than her sister, said that she had an idea “because people around our high school knew that she [Cindy] was [a lesbian]. People would come up to me and tell me ‘I saw your sister making out with this girl.’ So, I always had the suspicion, but I always made excuses for her...because I didn’t know for sure. I think I just didn’t want to admit it to myself.” Sibling participant Heather said, “I knew she [Wendy] experimented, but I figured it was a phase.” While Heather reported no specific example, her sister remembered having a brief relationship with a mutual friend who was living in their house for a short period of time. Wendy said that Heather “knew about it but never really wanted to acknowledge it.”

Three sibling participants had no idea about their sister’s sexual orientation before they came out. Rich, who was in college during his sister Dana’s high school years, said simply, “It wasn’t on the radar.” Jackie remembered never really thinking about it. However, she said, “Now that I know, there’s...so many things I should have picked up on before.” This sentiment was also reported by Adam, who stated, “I didn’t at the time, but when I think back to it there was a lot of things pointing to it.” He also asserted that, being twelve years old when she came out, he “wasn’t really old enough to be thinking about stuff like that.”

Disclosure

Questions about the disclosure process were asked of all participants. Lesbian participants were first asked to comment on self disclosure, or the time at which they came out to themselves. Some reported having more difficult times self-disclosing than others. They were also asked about disclosing to others. All were out to their immediate families, but some had yet to disclose to their extended families. Not wanting to hide their sexual orientations, and the desire to tell their families about their relationships were the most common reasons given for coming out. Most disclosed by telling their siblings and parents that they had a girlfriend or by making a full disclosure of their homosexuality. Lesbian participants expected their siblings to be much more accepting of their sexual orientation than their parents. Most sibling reactions were supportive and accepting, while parents seemed to have a harder time dealing with the initial disclosure.

Self Disclosure

Several of the lesbians interviewed reported that self disclosure took place over a period of several years. Faith said, "I've always felt different, but I didn't figure out that it was a sexual thing until I was probably twelve or thirteen...I remember when I was a child I viewed homosexuality as something that was really bad and dirty and sick. I didn't start accepting it as something that was even an option until I was 14."

Throughout the self disclosure process, denial can be a powerful agent, as Dana stated: "I guess when I was seventeen, I was somewhat dating a girl. And even though I was dating a girl...[and] I knew I didn't like boys...I didn't really self disclose." Kristi,

whose father was a preacher, reported having a very hard time negotiating the self disclosure process. She reported always feeling different from other girls and realized that she had her first crush, on a girl, in the sixth grade. She justified her feelings, however, by saying to herself, “Well, if I were a boy I would have a crush on that person.” As her feelings for girls became stronger, she stated, “Throughout seventh grade [and] eighth grade it started becoming more...clear that I was gay.” This also coincided with the time that she began to become more active in her church. She was baptized in sixth grade, and her religious beliefs met head on with her sexual development. She recalled, “In seventh grade, I thought I was going to Hell.” She reported having an ongoing dialogue with herself and God throughout her early teenage years concerning her “unpure thoughts”:

...I would get very mad at myself and be like “You can’t do that!” and I would just get really angry with myself...I would pray, you know, “Please God help me stop thinking these things.” And I was really angry too. I would get angry at God and be like “I kind of feel like you screwed me over!” Like, he made me gay but then he told me that I was going to Hell for being gay. So I was really mad at God. That year was a huge struggle. I think that’s the year that I was the most, like, suicidal, very depressed and very sad. Most little girls are like “I have a crush on Bobby” and I’m like, worrying about going to Hell...So I spent the whole year being mad...and not being able to tell anybody - that’s the worst part. I mean, who’s a seventh-grader going to be able to tell?

In high school Kristi did some research and even asked some of her teachers about their opinions and knowledge of homosexuality. She recalled one telling her that “some people choose to ignore the fact that they are gay and go on living straight lives.”

Another said she believed that children who did not fit traditional gender roles should be given hormones so they wouldn’t grow up to be gay. After reading about the potential

harmful effects of trying to “correct” sexual orientation, Kristi accepted that she was a lesbian and decided to simply ignore her same-sex feelings until she went to college.

Others expressed less difficulty in self disclosing. Cindy came out to herself at age 13. Rose and Carol both self disclosed at age 14, and Kendra at age 16. Wendy stated, “There is no pinpoint where I acknowledged that I was gay. I just always knew I liked girls...In second grade, I wanted to kiss Monica!” She did, however, acknowledge the time when she realized something was different. She recalled:

I was in fourth grade when we started having sex education. And I remember them teaching me the whole process of, like reproduction. And they said you need to be in love before you can do this biological act. And I remember sitting there thinking, “When are they going to talk about the girls?” And that was when it really sunk in.

For Wendy, self disclosure came not when she realized she was different from other girls, but when she realized other girls were different from her.

Disclosure to Siblings

The majority of lesbian participants chose siblings as the first family member to come out to (results concerning disclosure to siblings are shown in Table 3). However, while siblings were usually the first family member told, none of the lesbians interviewed came out to a member of her immediate family first. Only one, Dana, came out to a member of her extended family first. She told a female cousin who attended the same college. Two came out to friends who were also gay or bisexual, while two came out to female friends that they were interested in romantically. The last three also came out to friends, one of whom was a trusted ex-boyfriend.

Table 3: Disclosure to Siblings

Pair: Lesbian Sibling	First Immediate Family Member Told:	Why Disclose to Sibling (Interviewed)?	Exposure to Gays and Lesbians?	Age at Time of Disclosure	Come out in Public or Private	What Was Said To Sibling (Interviewed)?	Sibling's Initial Reaction (* = Reported by Lesbian Participant)	What Sibling Say About Disc Parents?
Dana Rich	Sibling	Trust, Easier	Yes	Dana-18 Rich-20	Private	Girlfriend, Full Disclosure	Thrown Off, Supportive*	Do not come out
Kristi Ashley	Sibling	Forced	Yes	Kristi-19 Ashley-17	Public	Full Disclosure	Surprised, Hurt, Supportive*	Come out after college
Faith Anthony	Sibling	Trust, Hiding, Testing the waters	No	Faith-15 Anthony-17	Private	Girlfriend	Thrown Off Supportive*	Be cautious
Wendy Heather	Sibling (not interviewed)	Hiding	No	Wendy-18 Heather-21	Private	Full Disclosure	Surprised, Supportive	Be cautious
Kendra Jackie	Sibling	Trust, Hiding	Yes	Kendra-16 Jackie-18	Private	Full Disclosure	Crying, Happy, Supportive	Come out when out of house
Rose Adam	Father	Hiding	Yes	Rose-16 Adam-12	Public	Full Disclosure	No Reaction, Supportive*	N/A- Already out
Carol Marcus	Mother	Forced	Yes	Carol-14 Marcus-24	Private	Nothing	No Reaction	N/A- Already out
Cindy Jody	Sibling	Forced	No	Cindy-16 Jody- 15	Private	Girlfriend	Surprised, Hurt	Be cautious

Six of eight lesbian participants reported that the first immediate family member they came out to were their siblings (five of those six were part of the sibling sample). Three of those six lesbian participants mentioned the fact that they felt they could trust their sibling. They mentioned “trust,” and a sense of “openness,” in their statements, but also a fear of having their parents find out. Kendra said that she and her older sister Jackie “could tell each other mostly anything” and that her younger sister was out of the question because “she tells everybody in the family everything.” One reason Wendy chose to tell her younger brother (not interviewed) first was because she claimed, “He’s never ratted on me. He’s never told on me.” Dana said that “It was just easier to say to you are gay or lesbian...to a brother or sibling because they don’t have the potential to kick you out, or they don’t have the potential to cut you off...so I trusted my brother first.”

Three participants were forced to come out to their siblings earlier than they had expected to. One weekend when Ashley was visiting Kristi at college, one of Kristi’s friends wanted them to go to a gay bar in a neighboring city. She recalls “So he had planned this and really wanted us to go and it was a really big deal...Ashley came and it just so happened that all my friends she was meeting at the time were gay. And I’m like, she’s going to figure this out so I might as well tell her.” Cindy was forced to disclose after her sister Jody saw her kissing a girl. After that, said Cindy, “She kind of forced it on me...I just confirmed it.” Carol had a somewhat similar experience with her step brother, Marcus. He was one of two in the sibling sample who was not the first

immediate family member to find out about their sister. He found out about her sexual orientation when he walked in on her kissing her girlfriend on the living room couch.

Heather was also not the first person in her immediate family to find out. Though she was not the first one told, Wendy still believed it was important that Heather know.

She stated:

I found myself in a serious relationship for the first time whereas previously I had just dated. I felt like I needed to come out in order to be able to be ok with me. It's like shedding your skin. You can't continuously lie to your family, and that's what I felt like I was doing by not telling them.

This sense of “hiding” or “lying” was mentioned by three other women when discussing why they felt the need to come out to their siblings. When asked why she decided to come out to her brother, Faith replied, “Because I didn't want to have that facet of my life quiet from him. I wanted someone in my family to know. I was living in this dual sphere, like my family sphere and my social sphere.” Kendra and Rose also mentioned that they were tired of keeping their sexual orientation a secret from their siblings. In Rose's case her brother Adam was the last in the immediate family she came out to, because of his young age. But by the time he was twelve, she had grown tired of using gender neutral pronouns when speaking of her girlfriend. She recalled, “We were talking about something it was in the context where I would have to talk like... ‘this person I was with’ and it was just getting kind of annoying. So I said ‘Hey Adam, guess what? I'm gay,’ and that was it.”

What Was Said

For both samples, what was said during disclosure, along with where and when it was said, was worth noting. Six of the eight disclosures took place in private, either in person or on the phone. The other two disclosures occurred in public, with people around. Lesbian participants were less descriptive when recalling how they came out to their siblings. Wendy, who came out to her sister Heather on the phone, did not even remember what she said. Carol, whose brother Marcus walked in on her kissing her girlfriend, said that they did not really talk about it after that incident. Two lesbian participants, Dana and Faith, remembered coming out to their brothers by telling them they had girlfriends. After her brother Anthony picked her up from her girlfriend's house Faith told him, "You should probably know that Melissa is more than just a friend. We have been dating for two months."

Four lesbian participants reported making a "full disclosure," telling their siblings they were gay. Kristi and her sister were walking around the block near Kristi's dorm when the topic of going to a gay bar came up. Kristi told her sister, "Well, Ashley, the reason I have been [to the bar] is because I'm gay." Kendra was in her sister's bedroom when she felt the time was right. She recalled saying, "Jackie, I need to tell you something." And she was like, 'Yeah, what is it?' and I told her 'I'm gay.' Straight out like that." Cindy was asked by her sister if she were bisexual, to which she replied, "No, I like girls...a lot."

Sibling recollections were more detailed than their lesbian sister's. Heather, whose sister, Wendy, could not remember exactly how she came out, said that Wendy

told her she had a girlfriend and that they were very serious. One other sibling participant, Anthony, said that his sister told him she had a girlfriend. Rich told a slightly different story than his sister Dana (who admitted her memory of telling Rich she had a girlfriend was questionable). He remembered Dana making a “full disclosure” The two had a running joke about softball teams being a metaphor for sexual orientation. One day, they were joking around and Dana “made a weird comment about like ‘You never know who bats for the other team.’ And I said ‘Are you batting for the other team now?’ And she said ‘Yeah.’”

Including Rich, four sibling participants reported that their sisters made a “full disclosure.” Ashley, Jackie, and Adam recalled the same stories told by their sisters and that they had all made full disclosures. Jody, who admitted being shocked after seeing her sister kissing a female, did not remember what was said in the conversation afterwards. Marcus also said he did not remember talking about anything specific with his sister after he saw her kissing her girlfriend.

Sibling Reactions

When their sister came out to them, siblings reported a variety of initial reactions. These reactions were often in line with what their sisters had expected from them. Only one lesbian participant reported being “unsure” of how her sibling would react. Wendy’s memories of her sister’s openly homophobic attitude in high school made coming out a challenge. She recalled:

I remember sitting at the table and her talking about these girls at school who were gay and how she hated it and how she hated them. And so that put a

permanent image in head about my sister and her perspective on that. It was really hard for me to come out to Heather...even though years had passed when I did come out to her and I knew that she had an open mind. But because we didn't talk all the time, I didn't know how much she had changed. We just didn't talk about it.

Both Kristi and Kendra expected their siblings to be "ok" with their disclosure, and have fairly positive reactions. Half of the lesbian sample did not expect much of a reaction at all from their siblings. Dana said she expected her brother Rich to react "how he has always been and say it's no big deal." Faith expected a similar reaction, stating her brother "isn't really the type of person who gets excited over anything." Rose did not think her brother, Adam, "would be very fazed by it." Cindy, also expected her sister Jody to "just kind of shrug it off." Only one member of the lesbian sample expected a negative reaction from her sibling. Carol expected to be "shunned" by her brother Marcus.

Both samples were asked questions about initial reactions to disclosure (see Table 3). Three siblings, Ashley, Heather, and Jody (who walked in on her sister kissing a female), reported being surprised by the disclosure. Rich and Anthony, older brothers of two of the lesbian participants, were not exactly surprised by the information, but said there was definitely a response. Rich, trying to find the right words to express his reaction, said "It wasn't a big surprise. It wasn't shock. It was more like, 'Oh, ok!'" Anthony also stopped short of saying he was surprised. However, he did admit he "was a little thrown off at first."

Jackie was the only sibling participant to report "crying" and being "happy" over the disclosure. She stated, "I started crying and I just told her that I was so happy that she

could tell me, that she felt comfortable enough to talk to me about it.” She was also one of two siblings who reported being supportive of their sisters. Heather, whose sister was unsure of how she would react, told her sister she was “very supportive of whatever made her happy.” Two sibling participants reported not having much of a reaction. Marcus stated, “I can’t say that I was really excited about it, you know. She’s my sister. I love her either way.” Adam, who was twelve at the time, recalled that “it didn’t really hit me at first...I didn’t really understand what that really meant, like, the big picture, but I didn’t have a problem with it.”

Two siblings reported being somewhat “hurt” that their sisters had been hiding their sexual orientation from them, and that they were not the first ones to be told. Ashley said that she “was just a little hurt that [Kristi] didn’t tell me before.” Jody said that several of their mutual friends and coworkers knew already and that her sister, Cindy “told them not to tell me specifically because she didn’t know what was going to happen...I just felt really left out and hurt that everyone else knew.”

Though only two siblings reported making “supportive” comments to their sisters, many in the lesbian sample interpreted their sibling’s reaction as supportive. Six reported that their siblings made supportive comments such as “that’s cool,” or “I’m still your sister” that were taken as assurance that everything was ok. Two even described their siblings as being “excited” over being told. Kendra said her sister was excited because she saw the disclosure as an act of trust. She remembered Jackie saying, “I can’t believe you actually trust me with this!” Dana recalled her brother, Rich, being excited about the fact that being more open and honest would improve their relationship.

A common question asked by siblings after the disclosure was if their sister was out to their parents. Only two of the lesbian participants had disclosed to their parents before coming out to their siblings. Of the remaining six siblings, five advised their sisters to be cautious when coming out to their parents, or not to come out at all. Fearing that her sister might be cut off financially, Ashley warned her sister not to come out until she graduated from college. Jackie also feared a drastic reaction from her parents and wanted her sister to wait until she was out of the house and in college. Though he handled his sister's disclosure well, Rich expected his parents to have a much more difficult time with it. He expressed concern that his parents would need time to adjust to the new information and even told his sister that she should not come out to them. He recalled telling her, "If Mom and Dad want to know and they ask you, that's their decision. I don't think you should go to them." But realizing it was something his sister had to do, he recommended a subtle approach, telling her that if she did come out, "Don't come home and hang the banners up and say 'Surprise!'" A more mixed parental reaction was expected from Heather. She thought that their father would be more accepting of her sister's sexual orientation than their mother. Anthony told his sister Faith that "she was going to have a hard time and that our parents weren't going to take to it very quickly." He did not, however, think she should stay closeted, stating, "My sister isn't the type to get knocked down that easily."

Disclosure to Parents

When asked if they thought their parents had any idea about their sexual orientation before they came out, all lesbian participants reported thinking that one or both of their parents had some idea. Dana and Wendy both believe their mothers knew. Wendy recalled her mother finding a note from a girlfriend and even asking her if she was gay (unprepared to answer the question, she said no). All other lesbian participants believe that both parents had thought about the possibility of their daughter being a lesbian, though several mentioned they were probably in denial (see Table 4).

Only two of the lesbian participants came out to their parents before coming out to a sibling. Carol came out to her mother because she was upset over breaking up with her girlfriend. Dana needed to tell her parents about her girlfriend in order to be able to visit her on a holiday break. Rose expressed a sense of frustration over hiding an important part of her life. She stated, “I just had so much stuff that I wanted to talk about. Just, stuff that I was hiding...my relationships and things.” In total, six lesbian participants said they came out because they were tired of being secretive. Three of those six wanted to tell their parents they had a girlfriend. Wendy had a serious girlfriend at the time and felt like she “was continuously lying to them.” Jody also wanted to be honest with her parents about her girlfriend. She did not want to lie about her relationship and said she would “like to actually be able to act like we are dating around them [her parents].” Kendra was tired not only of hiding her sexual orientation from her parents, but also of their constant inquiries about her relationship with a male friend. She recalled:

I had a really good guy friend, he's like one of my best friends...and we would hang out. I was just sick and tired of them [her parents] asking "Do you like Rocky? Do you like Rocky?" and me saying "No I don't like Rocky!"...I figured, if they knew I didn't like guys, they would stop asking and let me be.

Faith was forced to come out after her parents accidentally saw her kiss her girlfriend.

Her parents said nothing, and she did not come out right away. She stated, "I knew I had to tell them, but I kept putting it off. I knew it would be a scene and a big deal...and it was about three or four days later [when] we actually sat down. I didn't go to bed that week at all."

Table 4: Disclosure to Parents

Pair: Lesbian Sibling	First Immediate Family Member Told:	Exposure to Gays and Lesbians?	Why Disclose to Parents?	What Was Said To Parents?	Parent's Expected Reaction	Parent's Initial Reaction
Dana Rich	Sibling	Yes	Girlfriend	Girlfriend, In Writing	Unsure, Extreme Neg	Good, Silent Father
Kristi Ashley	Sibling	Yes	Hiding	Full Disclosure, In Writing	Unsure, Extreme Neg	Good
Faith Anthony	Sibling	No	Hiding, Forced	Girlfriend	Negative, Extreme Neg	Phase, Silent Father
Wendy Heather	Sibling (not interviewed)	No	Hiding, Girlfriend	Girlfriend	Unsure	Shock
Kendra Jackie	Sibling	Yes	Hiding, Girlfriend	Full Disclosure	Mixed	Shock, Cried
Rose Adam	Father	Yes	Hiding	Full Disclosure	Mixed	Good
Carol Marcus	Mother	Yes	Girlfriend	Girlfriend, In Writing	Negative	Good
Cindy Jody	Sibling	No	Hiding, Girlfriend	Full Disclosure, In Writing	Mixed	Cried, Phase

What Was Said

Four of the lesbian participants came out to their parents by telling them that they had girlfriends. In Faith's case, she and her parents sat down to discuss the tension that had been building since they walked in on her. This was the only instance in which the disclosure was not really on the lesbian participant's terms. She stated she was "already defensive when we walked in there and ready to defend my case." They asked her about her relationship and she told them they were dating. Carol e-mailed her mother and told her that she "was scared to tell her in person, and that [she] didn't think she would understand." She then wrote that she was gay and was upset because she had just broken up with her girlfriend.

Carol was not the only one who could not come out to her parents in person. She, along with three others, decided that the best way to disclose was in writing. Dana wrote:

...three or four sentences on four or five Post-It Notes...and I stacked them [on the kitchen table]. And it was basically, "Mom, Dad, I want you to know that I want to go to Richmond because I have a girlfriend there, and I'm gay, and I hope you still love me." And I signed my name.

Kristi and Cindy wrote more detailed letters to their parents. Kristi remembered writing "I knew I was gay, there was no changing it, and that don't want to disappoint them."

Cindy's letter "basically gave them a pre-answer to all the questions [she] figured they were going to ask; that it's not your fault, it's not a choice I've made, it's not a phase."

Four of the participants mentioned making a full disclosure to their parents, either in a letter or in person. While talking to her parents, Kendra said, "Mom and Dad, I have to tell you something. It's not bad or anything, but umm, I'm gay and it's something that I've been wanting to tell you for a while." Rose came out to her parents on separate

occasions. One day when she was feeling down, her father asked her what was the matter. Tired of hiding, she told him simply, "I'm gay." Later, her mother found out that she had lied about where she was going to be one night. She decided to come clean, saying "I didn't tell you where I was because I'm gay, and I was at ROSMY (Richmond Organization for Sexual Minority Youth, a local GLBTQ youth support group).

Parental Reactions

When discussing how they expected their parents to react, lesbian participants were fairly pessimistic. Three reported being "unsure" of how their parents would react. As Dana stated, "Part of me expected a good reaction, part of me expected a bad reaction." Kendra, Rose, and Cindy expected a "mixed" reaction from their parents. They all thought that their fathers would be accepting and that their mothers would have the hardest time dealing with the disclosure. Kendra said that because her mother's side of the family had a tendency to be openly racist, she expected her to be less accepting. Rose, whose parents were divorced, stated, "I knew my Dad would be totally supportive because...I could definitely tell he wanted me to [come out]. I was kind of worried about my Mom because of the connection between gay and AIDS, and her Catholic upbringing."

Carol and Faith expected "negative" reactions from their parents. Carol did not think her mother would understand and that she would be ignored. Faith said she "expected them not to like it." With this in mind she was "prepared for anything. I already had bags packed because I really didn't know. We never talked about it, so I

didn't know if they had some deep-seated hatred for gay people." Two others, Dana and Kristi, mentioned a fear of being kicked out or disowned (coded as "extreme negative"). As a precautionary measure, Kristi reported having "two or three people tell me I could live with them just in case...there was a bad reaction."

Several of the lesbian participants received a much better initial reaction than they were expecting. Four reported "good" initial reactions. These reactions focused on positives, like reassurance that they were loved, or that it was ok that they were gay. Two participants' parents told them that they had expected them to come out at some point. Kristi recalled her Mom telling her that they already knew and that her mom said "Well just don't stop going to church." Her father hugged her and said, "It's ok." Rose's mother told her that she was still in trouble for lying to her about where she was, but that being a lesbian was not a problem. In perhaps the most interesting reaction, Carol's mother replied, "Big deal! I could already tell." She then made a disclosure of her own, telling her daughter that she was bisexual.

Not everyone's parents were so accepting initially. Shock was reported as an initial reaction by the parents of two participants. Both Wendy and Kendra said their parents seemed shocked. Kendra stated "They were pretty shocked about it. They just started crying. My dad even started crying. It was hard. It was really hard." She had expected her father to be more accepting than her mother. She was surprised to find the opposite to be true. "My Dad was more not ok with it, and my Mom was more trying to accept it." Kendra and Cindy reported that one or both of their parents cried after disclosure. Two sets of parents, including Cindy's, told their daughters that they were

just going through a phase. Both Dana and Faith reported that their mothers did all the talking, while their fathers were silent. However, Faith's father made his opinions known by "rolling his eyes and scoffing at comments."

Family Relationships Since Disclosure

Both siblings and parents went through a time of adjustment after disclosure. Most siblings reported feeling closer to their lesbian sister since she came out to them. Lesbian participants also reported feeling closer to their parents since disclosure, even though parents seemed to have a harder time adjusting to their homosexuality than their siblings. Siblings also discussed their interactions with their parents, noting how they engaged their parents in discussion and often acted as mediators, after their sister came out. Table 5 provides an illustration of family relationships since Disclosure.

Table 5: Family Relationships Since Disclosure

Pair: Lesbian Sibling	Period of Adjustment for Sibling After Disclosure	Relationship With Sibling Closer, Same, or Worse	Amount of Time Since Disclosure to Parents	Period of Adjustment for Parents After Disclosure	Lesbian Participant's Relationship With Parents Closer, Same, or Worse	Siblings Discuss Sister's Sexual Orientation With Parents
Dana Rich	No	Dana- Closer Rich- Closer	3 years	Yes	Closer	Yes
Kristi Ashley	Yes	Kristi- Same Ashley- Closer	1 year	Yes	Closer	Yes
Faith Anthony	Yes	Faith- Same Anthony- Closer	5 years	Yes	Closer	Yes
Wendy Heather	Yes	Wendy- Closer Heather- Closer	2 years	Yes	Closer	Yes
Kendra Jackie	Yes	Kendra- Same Jackie- Closer	Less than 1 year	Yes	Closer	Yes
Rose Adam	Yes	Rose- Closer Adam- Closer	4 years	Father- No Mother-Yes	Closer	Yes
Carol Marcus	Yes	Carol- Closer Marcus- Closer	6 years	No	Closer	No
Cindy Jody	Yes	Cindy- Same Jody- Closer	Less than 1 year	Yes	Same	No

Sibling Relationships

I asked participants from both samples to discuss their relationships with their siblings since disclosure of the lesbian sister's sexual orientation took place. Seven of the sibling participants went through a period of adjustment. Some were more extreme than others. Kristi reported that her sister, Ashley, went home and cried for about a week, but "now our relationship is just as good as before." Wendy stated that though her sister was supportive of her sexual orientation, "You could tell at first that she was not really comfortable around me and [my girlfriend], and just being exposed to it." But as time passed she became more comfortable and even goes to gay clubs with her sister. Rose's brother Adam, who was only twelve years old when she came out to him, has "became more openly supportive of it, and telling me it's cool, rather than just being cool with it." Carol said that her brother and his wife "aren't so standoffish about it. They are more open and accepting about it. If I don't have anybody at a family gathering, they will ask me 'Who's coming?'"

Four lesbian participants reported that their relationships with their siblings is "about the same as before." Faith said of her brother, Anthony, "His reaction...never really changed. Recently, we have gotten into some political discussions where he sort of downplays [gay identity politics]. That's the only change I have noticed...he is awesome." Kendra stated that her sister Jackie, "to this day [is] awesome about it."

Siblings' descriptions of their relationships since disclosure were similar to their sisters'. Three siblings reported going through a process of "redefining" their image and dreams of their sister. Jackie said, "Over time I went through a period where I was real

selfish and thinking, I'm never going to have an aunt and uncle for my kids. And she's never going to get married, and I'm never going to be in her wedding." Ashley also mentioned expectations she had for her sister; "I had this dream of her marrying a guy and we would be close with that family. But, then I got over it." Jody, who reacted with shock after seeing her sister Cindy kissing a female said, "Now I'm very comfortable with it. I feel like that's the most natural setting to see her in. I love her girlfriend...It just seems like that's the most comfortable thing for her." Anthony and Adam reported that their sister's disclosure was a mind opening event. Adam admits to not knowing what the disclosure meant at first, but reports being supportive of his sister and gay rights in general. Anthony recalled:

When my sister told me she was dating a girl, I don't think I had a clear understanding of what gayness was. I never saw it as a bad thing, just something I didn't understand. I sort of did some homework on it. I took a psychology class and I learned quite a few things.

All eight sibling participants stated that they felt closer to their lesbian siblings since they came out. Rich stated, "I think our relationship as far as brother/sister goes has gotten a lot better. Before, we were just brother and sister by blood. I think now we have really become friends." Thinking back, Adam said, "I think I feel closer to her. I'm not sure if it's because of her coming out to me, or me just growing up. But we definitely have a close relationship." Jody also believed that she and her sister became closer, stating, "I don't think she keeps much from me now."

Parental Relationships

Seven of eight lesbian participants reported feeling closer to their parents since they disclosed their sexual orientation. Six mentioned not having to hide a significant aspect of their lives as a factor in bringing them closer to their parents. Five reported that their parents were becoming “more accepting” as time passed. Despite having what she called a “good” initial reaction, Dana admitted that “at first they were very uncomfortable with the whole situation...it was a little touch and go with how they were going to handle it. But now, two years later, my Mom goes to DC Pride [parades] and my Dad is counseling me on my girl problems.” Faith stated that her parents “had a pretty hard time with it, but they are getting better.” She believed one thing that has helped that transition was the woman she was dating at the time. She stated that, for her parents, “it mattered more about the person I had been dating. The first couple relationships I had were really unhealthy. The first woman I dated was a manic depressant and self-mutilating. It took them seeing me in a happy relationship for them to feel better. It’s still not ideal, but we are through the negative high school experience. We survived something.”

The amount of time since disclosure was a factor in two participants’ relationships with their parents. Cindy reported that “it really hasn’t been that long [since I came out to my parents]. I’ve only been home maybe once or twice since then.” She said her parents were still uncomfortable with the topic. “I told my mother about an SMSA [Sexual Minority Student Alliance] meeting I went to. When she asked me what SMSA was and I told her, she looked very faint.” Kendra also had only recently come out to her parents. She stated:

Mom pretty much accepted it at the beginning. She accepted that I was gay but she didn't really want to hear about any of my girlfriends or anyone I was seeing. It took my Dad at least a week to grasp that I am gay and I'm not going to change...After that they were more friendly. I mean, it's still hard for them now when [my girlfriend] Marie comes over and stuff. They get kind of mad when she's there too much or something. I think it's still hard for them, but they don't show it as much anymore. They try to accept it. That's all that I ask.

The periods of adjustment appear to last longer for parents than for siblings, and the expression of emotions felt during that period appear to be much stronger.

Sibling-Parent Discussions

Six sibling participants reported discussing their sisters' disclosures with their parents. Often, parents revealed feelings of uncertainty and disappointment that were not mentioned to the lesbian participants. Ashley recalled that her father, the preacher, expressed feelings of anger and shame with her. These were reactions that her sister, Kristi, did not report. Heather remembered that her mother told her she thought Wendy was only going through a phase. Rich remembered his father:

...was definitely in a funk for a while...My Dad was in such a weird mood. If things are stressing him out I'm like "Dad, we need to go get some coffee." We did that a couple of times and talked about it. I think, for him, it was that he was ok with it, but with his background he just wasn't. There's just so many deep down core values - like you know better, but it's so fastened in you that you kind of struggle between logical and emotional.

While sibling participants were recognized by their lesbian siblings as being supportive after their disclosure, it is clear that these children were also needed by their parents for support and as an outlet for the many emotions they were feeling.

Chapter Five: Discussion

In this chapter, I will provide an examination of the results of my study in light of existing research and theory. Findings that address research questions, along with other notable results, will be discussed. I will also discuss the implications for further research in the area.

A precaution on implications based on a limited sample

As stated in Chapter Four, this study was not without its limitations. The small and fairly homogenous sample, the methods used to obtain a sample, and the fact that those with more favorable attitudes concerning homosexuality are more likely to participate in such a study, warrant that the results be interpreted with caution. It is important to remember that the results are representative of these participants, and of their experiences in dealing with disclosure. A much larger and more diverse sample that addresses a broader array of reactions would be necessary for generalizations to larger populations.

Why do lesbians choose to disclose their sexual orientation to siblings?

While disclosing to family members was a goal for the participants in this study, the first step in that process was self-disclosure. Numerous studies have supported the

link between self-disclosure and the self-esteem of gay males and lesbians (Hammersmith and Weinberg 1973, Coleman 1982, Vargo 1998). The stigma associated with homosexuality is often hard for individuals to break free of when developing their own self images (Hammersmith And Weinberg 1973, Vargo 1998). This was true for several of the lesbian participants in this study. Faith recalled that as a child, she thought being gay was “something that was really bad and dirty and sick.” She “didn’t start accepting it as something that was even an option” until she was fourteen. Even Kristi, whose parents were outwardly accepting of gays and lesbians around their children, had an extremely difficult time coming out to herself, contemplating suicide at times.

The importance of siblings in the coming out process has been noted in previous studies (Jones 1978, Divine 1984, Mays 1998). In this study, sibling participants were more than twice as likely to report having a “close” relationship with their parents than were lesbian participants. For that reason, siblings may have been seen as a better first choice for disclosure. All but two of the sibling pairs reported having close relationships. Thus, is not surprising that the first immediate family members that six of eight lesbian participants came out to were siblings (five of whom were part of the sibling sample). These findings are consistent with both Jones’ (1978) and Devine’s (1984) reports that close relationships and shared backgrounds between siblings are reasons why siblings are often told about a person’s gay or lesbian sexual orientation before parents.

Sisters are often the sibling of choice for first disclosure (Mays 1998). Only three lesbian participants in this study had the option of choosing between disclosing to a sister or brother. Two of those, Rose and Cindy, disclosed to their sisters first, while Wendy

chose to come out to her brother first. Rose, however, came out to both parents before disclosing to either of her siblings.

Three of the lesbian participants who described their relationship with their sibling as “close” also mentioned the fact that they could trust their sibling not to out them to their parents. Another, Wendy, mentioned trust when explaining why she disclosed her homosexuality to her twelve-year-old brother (not interviewed) first. She stated that she chose to disclose to him first because he had never “ratted” on her. Faith also reported trust as a reason she disclosed to her brother. Dana, though “not close” to her brother, recalled trusting that, though he had the capability to out her to their parents and expose her to the risk of being cut off or kicked out, he would not. It is notable that four of six lesbian participants who disclosed willingly, and on their own terms (not feeling forced to do so) reported being able to trust their sibling not to reveal their lesbian identities to other members of the family, especially parents.

Disclosing to siblings can also be viewed as a step in the larger process of coming out to the entire family. This was true for all lesbian participants, except Carol, who seemed to have no real desire to disclose to her brother. Six members of the lesbian sample reported feeling like they were hiding something from or lying to their parents. The effects of being unable to share this important aspect of their lives obviously weighed heavily on them. Wanting to let their sexual orientation be known, yet fearful of parental rejection, it is possible that four chose to disclose to siblings as an outlet (the other two reported being forced into coming out to their siblings). Disclosing to a person with whom a close relationship is shared may be an emotional necessity for many.

Coming out to siblings is also used as a means to identify sympathetic allies within the family (Mays 1998). While this is an important observation, it has less significance when applied to this limited sample. Six of eight lesbian participants expected their siblings to have little or no problem with their sexual orientation. Thus, it can be assumed that they expected their siblings to be sympathetic allies. For these participants, coming out was not necessarily an attempt to identify allies, because their siblings had already been identified as such. Mays (1998) also stated that sympathetic allies can help ease the stress of disclosure throughout the family. This is very likely, considering the roles of moderator and counselor that members of the sibling sample took on after disclosure was made to their parents (discussed further below).

Disclosing to siblings first can also be viewed as an attempt to test the waters of the family environment and see if a broader disclosure is a viable option. Coming out to siblings can increase a lesbian or gay male's confidence when dealing with the possibility of coming out to parents and extended family members (Coleman 1982). Though Faith was the only participant to specifically mention testing the waters as a reason for disclosure, this phenomenon can be seen in the discussions between siblings after disclosure was made. Siblings were as pessimistic, if not more, concerning possible parental reactions as the lesbian participants themselves. Through these discussions, it was determined that the climate of the family was not right for disclosure at the time.

How do Siblings Experience the Coming Out Process of a Lesbian Sister?

If a system is defined as “a set of objects together with relationships between the objects and their attributes” (Broderick and Smith 1979: 112), then siblings, as well as

entire families, may be considered systems. Most lesbian participants expected their siblings' reactions to be positive, or at least, not negative. While their reactions to their sister's disclosure were all what I would consider positive, it is clear that over time they underwent a process in which they redefined their sisters' roles, taking into consideration the new input into their sibling system.

None of the siblings interviewed progressed through stages like those presented by Robinson (1989), Ben-Ari (1995), or Williamson (1998). Their scales were based on observations of parents, often in a counseling environment in which the parent was progressing through various stages of acceptance. One might speculate that siblings who react in negative or less accepting ways could more easily fall along a continuum similar to these. How these reaction scales apply to those who react in more positive ways from the beginning is unclear, in part due to the counseling environment in which they were developed. The participants in this study appeared to skip certain stages altogether. However, a much larger and more diverse sample is needed before generalizations concerning this can be made.

The phases presented by Devine (1984) do not necessarily apply solely to parents, but to family members in general. His stages are somewhat less rigid than those presented by others, and appear to allow for more positive reactions. The first phase, as described by Devine, is called subliminal awareness. Five of the eight siblings interviewed reporting having some idea that their sister may have been a lesbian before she came out. The second stage begins at disclosure, and is called impact. Devine described this as the crisis stage in which the new input is often greeted with a negative

reaction. None of the sibling participants rejected their sisters after disclosure, and none really had what I would consider a negative reaction.

The third phase presented by Devine is that of adjustment. During this phase, the family will make adjustments based on the new information. It is during this phase that they may choose to openly discuss the issue, or chose to ignore it. Both Adam and Anthony admitted not having a clear understanding of homosexuality at the time of their sisters' disclosure. Anthony recalled going through a process in which he actively sought out information and formed his own definitions "about what gayness was." All but two of the sibling participants engaged in discussions with their sisters about her sexual identity directly after disclosure. Less receptive siblings, however, may choose to ignore the issue. Interestingly, of the six lesbians who had not come out to their parents, two were told by their siblings not to disclose until after they had either finished college (Kristi) or moved out of the house (Kendra). Jackie, Kendra's sister, also advised her not to tell their younger sister. The other siblings warned their sisters to be cautious when disclosing to their parents, noting that they were either unsure about or fearful of their parent's reactions. Thus, if siblings are willing to discuss their sisters' sexual orientation, it is during this phase in which "testing the waters" of the family may occur. If siblings are unwilling, then the disclosing sister may realize that their sibling can not be considered a "sympathetic ally."

In extreme cases, siblings may attempt to keep the information a secret from others, and encourage their gay or lesbian siblings to do the same. Other than offering advice on parental disclosure, none of the siblings interviewed advised their sisters to remain closeted to friends or the outside world in general. In cases where a more

negative reaction occurs, the sibling may feel the effects of stigma transfer, as described by Goffman (1963). This concept is hinted at by Rich when, discussing his coworkers' knowledge of his sister's sexual orientation, he states: "I work with a lot of ex-military. I don't know how they would take it, and I don't want stereotypes brought up against her or me at work, so I don't drop the word [lesbian]." If a sibling is unwilling to acknowledge his or her sister's lesbian identity, because they are unwilling to take on this stigma, or they are simply unwilling to accept her identity as a viable option, they may never move out of the adjustment phase.

After progressing through adjustment, the siblings entered the resolution phase. During this phase, siblings mourn the loss of the roles they held for their sisters based on what was thought to be their heterosexual orientation. Though they did not necessarily call it a process of "mourning," three of the siblings interviewed mentioned this (coded as "redefining"). Ashley reported that after her sister's disclosure, she went through a week-long period of crying in which she had to alter the dreams she had of her sister marrying a man and come to the realization that her sister could be happy with a female, and that she could be happy with that relationship. Even Jackie, who seemed to have the most positive initial reaction, mentioned going through a "selfish" stage in which she had trouble modifying her expectations of her sister's wedding and family life to fit this new identity. It should be noted, that the act of mourning the loss of expectations can occur only if these expectations are held. It is quite possible that older siblings, or those who adhere to a more "traditional" concept of family, may have developed expectations that their sister would marry a male and have children. It is also possible that younger siblings, such as Adam, or siblings who had some idea that their sister may be gay, such

as Marcus, would not hold such expectations and, therefore, not undergo the process of mourning.

Devine's final phase is integration, in which the family has accepted the sexual orientation of the member and begins to integrate this into her new identity. Jody said that seeing her sister with her girlfriend now "feels like the most natural setting to see her in." Carol mentioned that her brother and his wife have come to expect to see her with a girlfriend at family gatherings. Kristi and Wendy stated that their siblings go to gay bars and clubs with them. Dana's brother, Rich, called her while visiting the Czech Republic and told her that she would love it there because the women were so beautiful. She stated that even though his initial reaction was positive, "he didn't start right away saying he saw hot girls all over the place, but, I mean, everybody has to have their time to come to terms with stuff like this."

These sibling systems all went through what family systems theorists call the process of morphogenesis, creating new rules and responses to handle the lesbian identity of their sister (Broderick and Smith 1979). None of the lesbian sisters was rejected by their sibling. If a sibling had not been able to handle their sister's disclosure and the system had broken down, that dyad would have lacked the requisite variety to deal with the input. Most siblings mentioned the fact that, no matter what, their lesbian sister was "still their sister." This indicates that rules had possibly been established within their group that put a sense of loyalty and acceptance above anything else. Thus, rather than rejecting their sisters, they accepted their own role as a sibling and expressed support for their family member.

Variables that Influence Sibling Reactions

Most studies that deal with the coming out process have focused on parental reactions. When examining reactions to disclosure, studies often focus on variables that are predictors of negative reactions. Keeping in mind that all but two sibling participants expressed support in their initial reactions, and that one of the two who was not supportive was hurt because she was not the first person told, this section will instead focus on why the reactions of these siblings were so positive.

All but two pairs of siblings stated that they had a “close” relationship before disclosure. One of the two who were “not close” were growing closer since the older sibling had gone away to college. As stated earlier, closeness was found to be a key reason that lesbian participants disclosed to their siblings. Three of the lesbian participants in those seven pairs mentioned the fact that they could trust their sibling with the disclosure, and four felt like they were lying to or hiding something from their sibling. When disclosure occurred, all but one sibling in those six “close” pairs responded with supportive comments. Thus, having a “close” relationship with a sibling may make a positive, supportive initial response to disclosure likely.

The age difference between siblings at the time of disclosure is another variable that should be examined when considering initial reactions. The oldest sibling participant, Marcus, was twenty-four at the time of his sister’s disclosure, ten years her senior. His relationship with his sister was described as “not close” thanks in part to the difference in their ages. He reported having no reaction to his sister’s disclosure. He also reported being accepting of, but not “agreeing with,” his sister’s sexual orientation. Adam was four years younger than his sister, Rose. This was the second largest age

difference at the time of disclosure (It should be noted that Adam was in sixth grade, and Rose in tenth when she came out). The remaining six sibling pairs had three or fewer year age difference at the time of disclosure. Of these six, all but one, Jody, expressed support initially. It is important to recall that the context of her sister's disclosure was also somewhat different than the others, as she walked in on her sister kissing her girlfriend, contributing more to her initial reaction of shock. From these examples, it could be said that a smaller difference between siblings at the time of disclosure might be seen as a predictor of supportive reactions to disclosure.

All but one of the sibling pairs reported not having restrictions placed upon them concerning gender roles growing up. Herek states that those who have less favorable attitudes concerning lesbians and gay males are more likely to have more "traditional [and] restrictive attitudes about sex roles" (1984: 6). The majority of this sample did not grow up in an environment where this was the case, and the majority had a positive reaction to disclosure. Thus, for the participants of this study, growing up in an environment that did not adhere to strict gender guidelines coincided with supportive initial reactions. It is important to note, however, that when discussing how their parents felt male and female children should behave, most examples that were given concerned female children taking part in stereotypically male activities. None of the male siblings reported playing with dolls or dressing in women's clothes, so it is unclear how that would have affected their parents' ideas about gender. It is possible that there was a double standard concerning their children's behavior however; it is impossible to say for sure.

Those with negative attitudes concerning homosexuality have been shown to be “less likely to have had personal contact with lesbians or gay men” (Herek 1984: 6). Only Anthony, Heather, and Jody did not report knowing any lesbians or gay males prior to their sisters’ disclosures. Kristi and Ashley had a lesbian aunt, and Rose and Adam had a gay uncle. Dana and Rich’s family had gay friends, while Marcus reported working for two gay males whom he had known in high school. Jackie also had gay friends from high school and college. Of those five, only Marcus was not supportive in his reaction. Those participants in this study who reported knowing gay males or lesbians and having positive interaction with them were more likely to be supportive than those who did not. These findings support previous research concerning exposure to homosexuality and more positive attitudes concerning it (Herek 1984, Herek and Capitanio 1996). Since these participants had positive exposure to lesbian or gay family or friends, it is possible that they were less concerned with the possibility of “stigma transfer” (Goffman 1963).

Concerning religion, four of the sibling participants stated that they were not religious. All four were supportive of their sisters’ disclosures. Herek (1984) showed traditional religious beliefs to be a predictor of negative responses to homosexuality. Thus, on this level, the data support Herek’s findings. However, I feel that this is an area in which the limitations of the sample come into play. While not every sibling initially reacted with support for their sisters’ disclosures, all participants were accepting of their sisters and their sexual orientations. Two sibling participants reported being “religious” and two reported being “somewhat religious.” I do not feel that these responses qualify the respondents as having “traditional” beliefs. However, sibling participants who

reported being at least somewhat religious were less likely to express support for their sisters upon disclosure.

Family Interaction Following Disclosure

The primary focus of this study was to better understand the reactions of siblings to the disclosure of a sister's lesbian identity. As stated above, the six siblings who were disclosed to before their parents could all be considered sympathetic allies, as described by Mays (1998). Each of those six, being either unsure or pessimistic about their parents' attitudes, warned their lesbian sibling to be cautious when coming out to their parents. Some even advised them not to come out at all, or at least until they were out of the house. The lag between disclosure to siblings and parents, which lasted longer for some than others, created both a challenge and an opportunity for the siblings. Jackie discussed this time period, which coincided with her parents becoming more inquisitive and seemingly worried about her sister's sexual orientation. She recalled:

That was the hardest part about because I knew for a year. She had told me over the summer and then like, last year, when I would talk to my mom she would say something to me like "Oh your sister dresses like a boy. You've got to talk to her," or even things like "All of your sister's friends are lesbians. Can you talk to her? Your dad's worried." [They were] wanting me to talk to her and confirm to them that it's OK and to not worry about her being gay. That was the hardest part because I couldn't come out and say "Well oh yeah, she is. *Ding, ding, ding-Hello?*" They talked to me about it a lot and they would say things trying to get the inside track. Like maybe if I could talk to her things could change.

Other studies have addressed this issue as well (Crosbie-Burnette 1996; Faith-Oswald 2000). In her study of six lesbian and bisexual women and twenty-five of their family and friends, Ramona Faith-Oswald found that:

In each network, there were instances in which the focal participant and the most important people to whom she was out withheld information about her bisexual or

lesbian identity from the most important people to whom she was not out. This restriction of information was justified as a way to protect the focal participant from rejection (2000: 70).

As stated in Chapter Four, parents were not interviewed for this study. Therefore, I was unable to gather information about their perspectives on their daughters' disclosures. I can, however, discuss their reactions as viewed by the lesbian participants, who witnessed their reactions first hand, and the sibling participants, who often acted as counselors, confidants, and friends to parents struggling to adapt to their daughters' sexual orientation.

Two pair of siblings made disclosure a family event. Faith disclosed to her parents with her brother Anthony's hands on her shoulders. Kendra came out to her parents with both her younger and older sister in the room. Her sister Jackie recalled:

We woke up one morning and we decided that we should tell them and that we should all be there for it – like the whole family. We sat them down and my parents just sat on the couch in fear because they knew what was coming I think. She told them that she was gay and that she felt that way for a long time. I did a lot of the talking and trying to help explain things because it was really hard for her and to explain it. I guess since I had already known it was easier for me to explain to my parents, like, you know, “Just because she's gay doesn't mean this, this, and this...”

Jackie, expecting negative reactions from her parents, knew she would have to play the role of mediator between her sister and her parents.

While four sets of parents were reported to have “good” initial reactions, only one, Jody's mother (who revealed to her daughter that she was bisexual), appeared to be totally accepting from the beginning. Her acceptance is important to note considering Herek's finding that people who are more likely to report engaging in same-sex behavior are more likely to be accepting (1984). The other parents, no matter what their reaction, appear to have progressed, or be progressing through, various levels of acceptance. With

disclosure, most parents were faced with an issue that they were not prepared to deal with.

Though all lesbian participants believed their parents had some idea about their homosexuality, one can sense a type of familial anomie in the responses of certain family members, especially fathers. Of the four sets of parents who were said to have “good” initial reactions, two appear to have had a more difficult time since. Kristi’s parents, have struggled with how to integrate their daughter’s lesbian identity into their family’s role as leaders of their church. Rules were established about who Kristi could disclose to in their community in order to avoid any conflicts with church members. Dana’s mother did all of the talking in response to her disclosure, and it was evident to her that her father struggled with the news as he sat silently. Faith also reported that her father remained silent during her disclosure. Their struggles to speak indicate that they had entered a state of anomie in which they had no rules on which to base a reaction. Thus, while their mothers reacted with the “stock” reaction of acceptance, their fathers were so stunned by the disclosure that they were unable to respond. Wendy and Kendra reported that their parents reacted with a sense of shock to the news, neither totally accepting nor rejecting their daughter. In Kendra’s case, her mother was more accepting, while her father responded with mixed emotions and extreme behaviors. She stated “there was a time where I would go to hug him and stuff and he was like, ‘No don’t touch me’ and then five seconds later he was like, ‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry I didn’t mean that.’”

Since I was unable to speak directly to parents, it is difficult to compare their progression to any of the scales developed by researchers (Robinson et al. 1989; Ben-Ari 1995; Williamson 1998). Some participants, such as Faith, Wendy, and Rose, came out

to their parents several years before these interviews took place. However, Rose and Wendy's parents seem to have progressed much more towards acceptance and a total integration of their daughter's sexual orientation than Faith's parents. Kristi's and Cindy's parents had known of their daughters' sexual orientations for the shortest amounts of time prior to the interviews, and it was clear that they were still in the early stages of adjustment. Dana, who had been out to her parents for about two years, said her parents have made a quick transition to acceptance. Both she and her brother believe that, after a rough start, an increasing environment of open communication among the members of the family helped make this transition easier.

After the lesbian participants came out to parents, four siblings seemed to take on the role of confidant to their parents. This is not an uncommon occurrence within the straight child-parent subsystem. Crosbie-Burnette states that it is possible that "the relationship will strengthen, perhaps as a result of the parents' perception of the straight child's normality, the straight family members helping each other adjust to their new status, and/or their pulling together in support of the gay or lesbian family member" (1996: 400). Rich stated, "I think my mom was really under the impression that I would go berserk and be very angry. I think she was very surprised that I didn't care. My dad and I talked but it was [like I was] counseling him." Heather mentioned her mother expressing doubt in the seriousness of her sister's disclosure and that she believed she was just going through a phase. Ashley reported that her father, the preacher, discussed his feelings of shame and anger with her. Those feelings were also a focus of Jackie's discussions with her father. He knew that his daughter was supportive of her sister, but his homophobic beliefs were not something that he could easily let go of. She mentioned

a time that her sister had come home for the weekend and had some friends over. She recalled “He said ‘I know you don’t want to hear it, but I’ve got five dykes out front on the driveway.’ Like people are going to see that there’s five gay people out on the driveway and they’re all going to freak out and run away or something.” Ritch Savin-Williams (1989: 3) states that there is a “tendency for most parents to consider their children to be extensions of themselves.” It is clear that in both Ashley’s and Jackie’s fathers’ cases, the idea of stigma transfer played a role in their difficulty coming to terms with their daughters’ lesbianism and incorporating this new identity into their concept of their families.

Implications for Further Research

When I began this project, I was amazed find that there was very little research concerning the role of siblings in the coming out process of lesbians and gay males. Even research that was described as dealing with familial reactions tended to focus on parents, while allotting a paragraph or short chapter to siblings. However, as noted in the March 19, 2002 cover story in *The Advocate* on siblings of gays and lesbians, it seems that some researchers are finally beginning to focus on the oft neglected, though very important, role of siblings in the coming out process.

Studies of a larger and more diverse population of siblings, who experienced a greater variety of reactions, are needed. Surveying siblings who reject their gay or lesbian siblings or those who are in various stages of acknowledgement or acceptance is necessary in order to understand the complete range of sibling reactions. It is also important that researchers shift their attention away from the “easy targets” of college

gay and lesbian groups or PFLAG samples. There have been some studies that indicate variations in the ways in which various ethnic groups approach disclosure (Mays 1998, Kenamer 2000). The results put forth by these studies need to be replicated and more research should be conducted in order to add to this small, but growing, body of literature. In the future, researchers should also make attempts to study those with less formal education, those from more diverse class backgrounds, religious beliefs, and age groups in order to see what, if any, the effects of these variables are on the way gays and lesbians disclose their sexual orientation and how family members, specifically siblings, respond.

Family structure is another issue that should be addressed. Families are increasingly found in many varieties, and this should be examined within the context of disclosure of a gay or lesbian sexual orientation. The respondents interviewed in this study all came from families of five or less. Broderick and Smith (1979) state that large families and small families are so different, that they must be treated as entirely different systems. Considering the possibilities for siblings to act as mediators in small families, the possibility for multiple reactions and attitudes from multiple siblings is an issue that has seemingly endless possibilities.

Summary

When asked why they disclosed their sexual orientation to their siblings, the lesbian participants in this study stressed the importance of having a close relationship. Being able to trust their siblings not to reveal their lesbian identity to other family members was also an important factor. Since a majority of lesbian participants expected

positive (or neutral) reactions from their siblings, it is likely that they had identified their siblings as sympathetic allies before disclosure, and hoped that they would help ease the stress of disclosure to the rest of the family. All members of the lesbian sample who had not yet disclosed to their parents discussed the possibility of coming out to them with their siblings. This lends support to theories that coming out to siblings is an attempt to “test the waters” of the family to evaluate possibilities for further disclosure.

All sibling participants in this study report that they were accepting of their sister’s sexual orientation. Six of eight siblings expressed supportive initial reactions, though disclosure did come as a surprise to some. Two siblings expressed feeling hurt at the time of disclosure. However, this reaction was based more on the fact that they were not the first persons told, rather than disappointment or anger over their sisters’ sexual orientation. All siblings went through an adjustment phase in which they had to redefine the roles and expectations they held for their sister. This progression did not appear to be as long or as turbulent as suggested by scales based on parental reactions (Robinson 1989; Ben-Ari 1995; Williamson 1998).

Several variables may be related to supportive reactions to disclosure in this sample. Five of six siblings who had a close relationship with their sisters expressed support at the time of disclosure. Small age differences at the time of disclosure also revealed notable results. Five of the six siblings who had an age difference of three or fewer years had supportive initial reactions. The one who did not react supportively was one of two sibling participants who felt hurt at the time of disclosure. Both of these participants were only one year younger than their lesbian sisters at that time. Those who reported having contact with gay males or lesbians were more likely to report supportive

reactions, supporting previous research (Herek 1984, Herek and Capitanio 1996). Almost all sibling participants commented that, no matter what, their sister were “still their sisters.” Thus, it could be assumed that the role of sibling as being supportive, caring, and a member of the family, weighed heavily on sibling participants to accept their sisters’ sexual orientation, rather than reject both their sisters, and their roles as siblings.

After disclosure, siblings now actively engaging in the “supportive ally” role were faced with the unique responsibility of withholding their sisters’ lesbian identities from their parents until their siblings came out to them. After disclosure to parents, four of the six siblings who had previously been told acted as confidants to their parents, who were in need of support and alternative opinions while dealing with state of familial anomie that had been brought about by their daughters’ disclosures.

For the participants in this study, close relationships, and a sense of trust appear to be associated with a supportive reaction to the disclosure of a sister’s lesbian identity. Sibling participants were in the unique position of seeing both their sisters and their parents in perhaps their most vulnerable moments. It is clear that in these moments of trust, when sisters and parents disclose and confide, siblings have the potential to play a vital role in negotiating the coming out process for their entire family.

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Appendix I

Research Subject Information and Consent Form

Title: Sibling Reactions to the Disclosure of a Lesbian Identity of a Sister

VCU IRB Protocol Number:

Sponsor: VCU Department of Sociology and Anthropology

Investigator: Dr. Julie Honnold

This consent form may contain words that you do not understand. Please ask the study doctor or the study staff to explain any words that you do not clearly understand. You may take home an unsigned copy of this consent form to think about or discuss with family or friends before making your decision.

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this research study is to examine the effects of a sister's disclosure of a lesbian identity on her sibling(s). You are being asked to participate in this study because A) you volunteered, or B) you were recommended by another participant, and may meet the entry requirements.

Description of the Study:

This study aims to provide insight into the coming out process of lesbians and the effects this process has on their sibling(s). In this study, the answers you give to questions will be recorded and compared and contrasted to the answers given by other participants.

Your participation will last up to one and one-half hours. Approximately twenty subjects will participate in this study.

Procedures:

If you decide to be in this research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form after you have had all your questions answered.

Your participation in this research study will consist of one interview session. You will be interviewed and asked questions dealing with either A) your experience disclosing

your lesbian identity to your sibling(s), or B) your experience dealing with the disclosure of your sister's lesbian identity.

Risks and Discomforts:

The context of family interaction, especially when dealing with the subject of sexuality could possibly cause negative emotional reactions. Several interview questions will ask you to reflect on events that have occurred and feelings you may have experienced in the past. As a precautionary measure guarding against a negative emotional reaction, the name and contact information of an AASECT (American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists) certified counselor will be provided during the pre-interview briefing.

Another potential risk concerns the social stigma attached to homosexuality. You may be concerned about your name being associated with a study dealing with homosexuality and the family. The procedures for explaining confidentiality are explained below.

Benefits:

This is not a medical, or treatment study, and you are not expected to receive any benefits from your participation in the study. The information from this research study may be a valuable addition to the literature concerning homosexuality and the family, and may help others in the future as they deal with those issues.

Costs:

There are no costs associated with this study.

Alternative:

N/A

Confidentiality:

The only person who will have access to any records that could possibly identify or link you to this research study will be the Student Investigator. If you choose to participate in this study, your interview will be recorded on an audio tape. You will also be asked to verbally give consent to allow the interview to be taped. At the beginning of the interview, the Student Investigator will read a number onto the audio tape. This number will also be recorded on a paper list and will be associated with the participant's name and their sibling's name. After both participants have been interviewed, the paper list will be destroyed, and none of your personal information will remain connected with this study. The audio tape will then be transcribed into an electronic data file (i.e. Microsoft Word). Upon completion of the transcription, the audio tapes will be destroyed.

Compensation for Injury:

N/A

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal:

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide to not participate in this study. If you do participate you may freely withdraw from the study at any time. You may also choose not to answer particular questions on the interview.

Questions:

In the future, you may have questions about your study participation. If you have any questions, contact:

Dr. Julie A. Honnold
 Dept. of Sociology and Anthropology
 PO Box 842040
 Richmond, VA 23284
 (804) 828-6680

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact:

Office for Research Subjects Protection
 Virginia Commonwealth University
 1101 E. Marshall St., Room 1-023
 P.O. Box 980568
 Richmond, VA 23298
 Telephone: 804-828-0868

Do not sign this consent form unless you have had a chance to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers to all of your questions.

Consent

I have read this consent form. I understand the information about this study. All my questions about the study and my participation in it have been answered. I freely consent to participate in this research study.

I understand that I will receive a signed and dated copy of this consent form for my records.

By signing this consent form I have not waived any of the legal rights which I otherwise would have as a subject in a research study.

Subject Name, printed

Subject Signature

Date

Signature of Person Conducting Informed Consent Discussion Date

Investigator Signature (if different from above) Date

Appendix II-A

Questions for the Lesbian Participant

Demographics

What is your age?

What is your educational status?

Where are you from, originally? Is it rural? Small town? Suburban? Urban?

How would you describe your family's class status?

Describe your family structure.

- Are you from a two-parent home?
- How many siblings do you have?
- Do you have a large extended family in the area?

Religiosity

Do you come from a religious family?

Do you consider yourself to be religious?

Is the sibling being interviewed religious?

Are your other siblings religious?

Disclosure

How old were you when you self disclosed (came out to yourself)?

Who did you first come out to and why?

Who are you out to in your family?

Who did you disclose to first? Why? Second? Third? Etc...?

Describe your relationship with the sibling being interviewed before you came out to him/her.

Do you think he or she knew (or had any idea) that you were a lesbian before you told them?

Why did you choose to come out to him/her?

How old were you when you came out to him/her?

How old was he or she when you came out to them? Was he or she married when you came out? If so, do they have children? Were/are you close to their spouse and children?

What did you say to them when you came out (as close to the exact words as you can remember)?

How did you expect them to react?

What was their initial reaction?

How did their reaction/opinion change over time (1 month- 6 months- 1 year)?

Parents

Did your parents openly discuss sexuality with you and your siblings as children?

How did your parents think female and male children ought to be like or behave?

Are you out to your parents?

Describe your relationship with your parents before you came out.

Do you think they knew (or had any idea) that you were a lesbian before you told them?

Why did you choose to come out to them?

How old were you when you came out to them? How old were they?

What did you say to them when you came out (as close to the exact words as you can remember)?

How did you expect them to react?

What was their initial reaction?

How did their reaction/opinion change over time (1 month- 6 months- 1 year)?

Do you feel as close to them as you did before you came out?

What did they say about disclosing to others (other family members, friends, public in general)?

Appendix II-b
Questions for the Sibling Participant

Demographics

What is your age?

What is your educational status?

Where are you from, originally? Is it rural? Small town? Suburban? Urban?

How would you describe your family's class status?

Describe your family structure.

- Are you from a two-parent home?
- How many siblings do you have?
- Do you have a large extended family in the area?
- Are you married? Do you have children? Is/was your sister close to them?

Are you currently employed?

Are you the primary wage earner in your household? Does your spouse work?

Religiosity

Do you come from a religious family?

Do you consider yourself to be religious?

Is the sibling being interviewed religious?

Are your other siblings religious?

Disclosure

Describe your relationship with your sister before she came out to you.

How close to your other siblings are you?

Did you know (or have any idea) that your sister was a lesbian before she told you?

How old were you when your sister came out to you? How old was she?

How did your sister come out to you? What did she say (as close to the exact words as you can remember)? Public or private?

Were you the first person in your family that she came out to?

Why do you think your sister chose to come out to you?

What was your initial reaction?

How did your reaction/opinion change over time (1 month- 6 months- 1 year)?

What did you say to your sister about disclosing to others (other family members, friends, public in general)? Has this opinion changed over time?

Do you feel as close to her as you did before she came out?

Friends and Coworkers

Do you talk about your members of your family with your friends?

Do any of your friends know that you have a sister who is a lesbian?

If so, did you tell them directly?

Did their reactions influence your decision to tell other people?

Do you ever discuss your family to coworkers?

Do you ever mention that you have a lesbian sister to coworkers?

Do you ever find yourself in the company of those who make anti-gay remarks or jokes?

If so, how do you react?

Parents

Describe your relationship with your parents.

Did your parents openly discuss sexuality with you and your siblings as children? Did your schools?

If so what was their approach?

Was there ever mention of sexual orientation in their discussions?

How did your parents think female and male children ought to be like or behave?

Is your sister out to your parents?

If so, do you think they knew (or had any idea) that she was a lesbian before she told them?

When and how did she disclose her orientation to them? Did she come out to them before she came out to you?

What was their initial reaction? Has their opinion changed over time?

Did they talk to you and your other siblings about your sister's sexual orientation?

Vita

Ryan W. McKee

Education

Master of Science in Sociology, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA, 2003

Bachelor of Science in History and Social Science, Radford University, Radford, VA, 2000; Minor: Political Science

Academic Teaching Experience

- Adjunct Faculty Member in Sociology, Richard Bland College, Petersburg, VA, 2003

Academic Honors and Awards

- Virginia Commonwealth University Graduate Scholarship, 2000-2001
- Radford University Sigma Chi Fraternity Balfour Award for Academic Excellence. 1999-2000

Papers and Publications

- Honnold, Julie A., Ryan McKee, and Mary Ellen Rives, 2003. Lynchburg Youth Survey: Summary Report, 2002. Report to the Lynchburg City Schools, Survey and Evaluation Research Laboratory, Virginia Commonwealth University.