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Negative Effects of Coming Out as LGBTQ+ in a Non-Supportive Family

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ABSTRACT

This study will explore the effects of coming out in a non-supportive family. The coming out process is when an individual discloses their sexual identity to another person.

Coming out can be a wonderful experience for some or a negative life-changing moment.

This interpretive phenomenological study examined the patterns and themes found through four extensive interviews. The four participants recruited through social media and flyers participated in an interview where they were asked questions about their coming out experience. The minor common themes were experiences by three out of the four participants. These minor common themes were failed parenting, coming out tests, sexual orientation as a lifestyle, and fear. While this study was focused on the negative effects of coming out, there were three positive effects: happiness, pride, and freedom. This study will be used in future research and to help guide the field forward when it comes to helping LGBTQ+ individuals.

Negative Effects of Coming Out as LGBTQ+ in a Non-Supportive Family

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of Marriage and Family Studies

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Masters of Marriage and Family Therapy

By

Ashley Nicole Hemphill

August 2020

This thesis, directed and approved by the committee for the thesis candidate Ashley Hemphill, has been accepted by the Office of Graduate Programs of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Marriage and Family Therapy

Donnie Snider
Assistant Provost for Graduate Programs

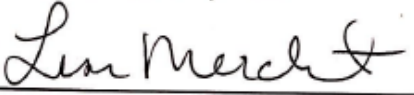
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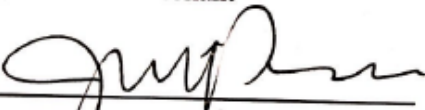
Thesis Committee



Dr. Lisa Powell, Chair



Dr. Lisa Merchant



Dr. Joanna Méndez-Pounds

This thesis is dedicated to all of those who have supported me and believed in me throughout this process. Your care, love, and encouragement were guiding lights during the darkest points. A very special thanks goes to my parents, James and Deborah Hemphill, for loving me and supporting me no matter what. You will never know how much you both mean to me or how grateful I am for the unconditional love you both have for Amber and me. Amber, thank you for being my best friend from day one; I love you!

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Overview

The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer plus (LGBTQ+) community has faced endless discrimination and adversity throughout history (Sears, Mallory, & Hunter, 2009). This community has always existed but seems to be misunderstood, even in the more progressive 21st century. Although many countries have taken strides to aid this community in its fight for equality, there is still plenty of work to be done. Some of this work starts on a smaller scale of family rather than the political scale of policy alterations. LGBTQ+ members do not follow the heteronormative path, and for that reason they are treated differently than their straight peers. They experience hate, violence, isolation, abandonment, death, and many other risks (Halliwell, 2019).

Within the LGBTQ+ community, members have a unique process they must traverse to live as their true selves. The coming out process is when an LGBTQ+ individual discloses their sexual orientation (Manning, 2015). This process can have many different outcomes. When coming out, LGBTQ+ individuals hope for a positive experience, filled with acceptance and love; however, this is not always the case. Some might believe that their family is going to love and support them; this is not a guarantee when someone comes out as LGBTQ+ (Harris, 2018).

While there are positive outcomes for LGBTQ+ individuals, what does a negative coming out experience look like for someone of this community? LGBTQ+ community members might live without the support of their family due to their coming out. Some have sought professional help to deal with the pain of coming out while others were able to resolve their pain on their own (Miller, 2016). These individuals might lose their close relationships with parents, siblings, and extended family after coming out. Struggles with self-esteem, religious identity, and sense of self might all come up during this time. There could be numerous reasons behind family cutoff after a coming out none the less, the experience of LGBTQ+ individuals are unique.

Research Questions

This phenomenological qualitative research study looked at the LGBTQ+ population specifically. Negative coming out experiences are not the only type of experience had by this community; however, they were the focus of this study. For those who had a negative experience coming out to family, what do they believe were the contributing factors that led to the negative response? How are they accepting of the hurt and grief that might accompany cutoff from family members? What are the things they wish they knew before they came out? Are they content with their choice to come out even though it cost them their family? Conducting interviews allowed for first-person narratives to come to the surface, which created an environment for better understanding of the lived experience.

Research questions will include: 1) What are the contributing factors that led to a negative coming out experience? 2) Are they coping with the loss and fear of detaching from family members? 3) Are there things they wish they knew before coming out?

4) Are they content with their choice to come out even though it was a negative experience? 5) Based on the experience of these individuals, how can helping professions better assist this community?

Purpose of Research

The purpose of this research is to make meaning of the effects of coming out in a non-supportive family on members of the LGBTQ+ community. Coming out is a daunting process for those who lack the support of their family, and it can take a devastating toll on an individual. Familial connections are extremely important to most people, and having family stripped away can alter the course of one's life. Coming out can go one of a few ways, but this study will look at the impact of a negative coming out experience.

The outcome of this phenomenological study will be helpful to individuals who are in helping positions around the LGBTQ+ community. These may include therapists, counselors, teachers or mentors helping individuals find themselves in the world. It can also be used as a resource for those who are allies of the community, helping to build understanding. Understanding what experiences LGBTQ+ individuals must face during the coming out process can inform the work and research of those close to the community or those who are trying to understand the community. This participatory action research (PAR) can help provide information and reflection so better action can be taken with individuals who have a coming out story.

CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Mental Health

LGBTQ+ individuals have mental health risk and protective factors that are different than their heterosexual counterparts (Bennett & Douglass, 2013). The LGBTQ+ population, like many other unique populations, experiences both risk and protective factors. The risk factors this community faces create an environment that makes coming out a struggle while the protective factors can make coming out a freeing experience. LGBTQ+ youth have a higher risk of mental health disorders compared to their heterosexual peers (Russell, 2010). This risk causes the rate for attempted and consideration of suicide to be higher in LGBTQ+ individuals than in individuals who are heterosexual (Barnett, Molock, Nieves-Lugo, & Zea. 2019).

A way to combat this risk is to integrate more inclusive school policies that work to assist LGBTQ+ students (Steinke, Root-Bowman, Estabrook, Levine, & Kantor, 2017). LGBTQ+ students need support in the form of peers, family, schools, and many other areas of the community. When LGBTQ+ individuals get this support, they can grow and learn in a healthy way.

Impact of Discrimination on Mental Health

LGBTQ+ youth struggle each and every day in many of their environments. They face discrimination at school, at home, and in society due to their sexual orientation. Discrimination increases the risk for mental health disorders, leading to higher rates of

suicide in this population (Rivers, Gonzalez, Nodin, Peel, & Tyler, 2018). Discrimination has been a constant stressor for older LGBTQ+ individuals. Constant discrimination begins to take its toll on the well-being of the LGBTQ+ individuals; their well-being is what determines if they want to take their life or not (Cochran & Mays, 2009). The mental health field is starting to gather what support can and will do for individuals who identify as LGBTQ+.

Individuals who are LGBTQ+ have been found or observed to be more suicidal than their heterosexual counterparts. The increase in suicidality is due to the discrimination that they experience at home, work, school, online or in media and in the therapy room (Cochran, 2001). The LGBTQ+ community might seek professional help for their mental health through therapists and counselors. Some LGBTQ+ individuals will face discrimination in these professional settings, leading them to distrust mental health professionals. Discrimination makes it harder for LGBTQ+ individuals to find or seek help, which in turn leads to higher suicide rates and self-harm (Barnett, Molock, Nieves-Lugo, & Zea, 2019). LGBTQ+ individuals are experiencing negative factors in their lives already; they need a safe environment, like the therapy room, in order to maintain treatment and score high in well-being (Mereish & Poteat, 2015). This population has risk and protective factors unique only to itself. However, coming out as LGBTQ+ can have positive and negative ramifications to it.

Coming Out

Coming out is the process of identifying oneself out loud to others as being a member of the LGBTQ+ community. While the LGBTQ+ population is a minority group, the members of this group are able to determine for themselves if they want to be

part of the community or if they want to keep their sexual orientation a secret, unlike other minority groups who might not have the choice to blend in with society (Goldberg & Smith, 2013). Coming out can be a smooth experience or a grueling one. Many LGBTQ+ individuals worry about being rejected in today's "heteronormative" society (Dewaele, Van Houtte, Cox, & Vincke, 2013). Coming out can be seen as a new chapter for many as they are able to break the chains of silence to become who they have always wanted to be. (Vincke, 2002). Coming out is an experience that is unique for every person who identifies as LGBTQ+. Some people come out in supportive families while others come out in non-supportive families.

The coming out process can be a source of distress for some members of the LGBTQ+ community due to fear of rejection from those closest to them or fear of harm (Braga, Oliveria, Silva, Mello, & Silva, 2018). The constant state of distress impacts the mental health of the individual making everyday life difficult. Coming out can vastly improve someone's mental health by taking away the constant state of distress and feelings of hiding a part of one's self (Pitoňák, 2017). Today LGBTQ+ individuals are coming out at younger ages, causing discussions about LGBTQ+ youth and how being out so young might be impacting them (Scannapieco, Painter, & Blau, 2018).

Youth Coming Out

Youth are coming out in their schools as part of the LGBTQ+ community. This can lead to bullying and discrimination in school but coming out as an adult can lead to more positive experiences and social support (Pachankis, Cochran, & Mays, 2015). Coming out as an adolescent can be extremely taxing on a person. When youth come out in non-supportive homes there can be extreme outcomes or repercussions to this. There is

still a chance a student will face discrimination (Russell, Toomey, Ryan, & Diaz, 2014). Family members can still disown the LGBTQ+ youth or can begin to make life rather difficult for them, leading to mental health concerns. Youth who come out can be targeted for their sexuality, but they also have a higher self-esteem rating in adulthood (Russell, Toomey, Ryan, & Diaz, 2014).

Impact of Coming Out

Coming out has positive and negative aspects to it. The stigma around sexual identity minorities can be what causes these individuals to want to keep their identity hidden (Wofford, 2017). There are still gaps in the understanding of this community and that lack of information can bring up harmful stereotypes or stigmas about this community. If someone comes out and is immediately discriminated against, their well-being begins to fall, but if they are supported their well-being stays the same or rises (Ryan, Legate, Weinstein, 2015). Having support from family and friends is extremely important to the mental health of LGBTQ+ individuals.

Support

There are many forms of support for individuals who identify as LGBTQ+, such as online, family, friends, therapy, and many other areas where one can seek support. Having support when coming out can make a difference for the individual. Many people seek that familial support but turn to online support when the family support is not there (Cannon, 2017). When family turns away, LGBTQ+ individuals turn on their devices and seek the support of their community. A study found that if there is not any support from the family, the individual can become “slightly addicted” to the online community they have built for themselves (Han, Han, Qu, Li, & Zhu, 2019).

Online Support

Online support for LGBTQ+ youth has become the center of many studies. People want to know whether it is useful or harmful. Social media support for LGBTQ+ youth has proven to be important in the well-being of the individuals. Social media has become more and more prominent in the LGBTQ+ community with the rise in technology and access to these platforms (Ceglarek & Ward, 2016). It helps them build relationships that are healthy and allows them a safe space to talk about mental health, discrimination, and other unique experiences they are having (McConnell, Clifford, Korpak, Phillips, & Birkett, 2017). One study found that being open with a group on Facebook led to healthier well-being than openness in other areas of their life (Nabi, Prestin., & So, 2013).

Family Support

Family support for LGBTQ+ youth is important to protecting the youth (Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001.). Familial support leads to happier and mentally healthier individuals. Individuals crave the support and acceptance of their loved ones. Having the support and acceptance from family can lead to a better chance of higher overall satisfaction with life resulting in less internalized stress, homophobia, and depressive symptoms (Feinstein, Wadsworth, Davila, & Goldfried, 2014). Many LGBTQ+ adults craved the acceptance and support from their families. One study found that there were four themes LGBTQ+ adults experience throughout their lives: 1) They expressed a need to come out. 2) The initial reactions for many of these individuals was negative. 3) One of the many barriers to immediate acceptance was found to be religion. 4) LGBTQ+ youth craved support from their family members during and after the coming out process

(Roe, 2017). One study found that family is important to LGBTQ+ individuals, and many of the older LGBTQ+ individuals wish they would have had the family support (Schroeder, 2015). The need for connection and the want for familial support is seen in other aspects of life, like an infant reaching for its providers or calling for a caregiver when someone gets injured. Gaining familial support can be difficult at first. However, therapy can be an avenue to facilitate accessing family support. Therapy can help bring families that are currently struggling with acceptance together.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Phenomenological Study

The phenomenological study sought to understand the experience of LGBTQ+ individuals who self-reported a negative coming out experience. The study attempted to answer these questions: 1) What are the contributing factors that led to a negative coming out experience? 2) Are they coping with the loss and fear of detaching from family members? 3) Are there things they wish they knew before coming out? 4) Are they content with their choice to come out even though it was a negative experience? 5) Based on the experience of these individuals, how can helping professions better assist this community?

Phenomenology is a qualitative research method. The goal of phenomenological studies is to unearth and describe the lived experiences of participants (von Eckartsberg, 1998). Unlike quantitative research methods, phenomenological studies use the perspective of the individual, rather than numbers, to describe a certain phenomenon. The researcher is not detached from their research in this type of study. A phenomenological study gathers generous descriptions of the experiences of the participants (Groenewald, 2004). With its focus on the lived experience and meaning derived from that experience, phenomenology is best suited to answer these questions about the coming out experience.

As a person who has experienced a positive coming out experience and who has witnessed friends having negative coming out experiences, the researcher's knowledge of

this process influenced their research and provided a basis on which to choose the research questions used in this study. Tracking the researcher's emotional responses through this research helped them to find additional meanings that the participants further expressed in their stories.

Participants

This study used convenience sampling and snowball sampling to obtain participants. The convenience sampling was done through social media by sharing a flyer over several platforms. The digital flyer was the same as the physical flyer and had the contact information for the researcher. The physical flyer was posted around the Marriage and Family Institute at Abilene Christian University in Abilene, Texas, and other locations that were willing to post a flyer in their establishment. The snowball sampling was done through word of mouth from participants that had already been selected. The participants contacted the researcher to see if they were a potential candidate after viewing the flyer on social media or in the Marriage and Family Institute.

When potential participants contacted the researcher, the researcher would screen them to ensure they meet eligibility criteria, which included: being a member of the LGBTQ+ community, being 18 years of age or older, having come out to their family about their sexuality, and having a negative family reaction to their coming out. If the volunteer met the inclusion criteria, they would be asked if they wanted to participate in the study. If they did wish to participate, the researcher would schedule an in-person interview with the participant. In-person interviews took place at a location in which the participant felt most comfortable and where privacy could be ensured. The comfortable locations that the participants selected were their homes or their offices at work. The

researcher sent the interview questions at least three days prior to the interview so participants could review the material. This email also consisted of instructions on what to do to prepare for the interview. If the volunteer did not meet the criteria or did not wish to participate, the researcher thanked them for their time and wished them well. A total of four participants completed the interview process consisting of two females and two males between the ages of 28 to 45 years of age. Additional information is being withheld to protect participants' privacy.

Interviews

Each interview was recorded in order to later transcribe verbatim to produce transcripts of the interview. The interview began with a verbal and written statement of consent. The interviewer reviewed the informed consent document with the participant, and then the participant was informed that they could end the interview at any time if they felt uncomfortable or changed their mind about participation. Then the interview, which ranged from 20 to 30 minutes, would begin and consist of questions about the participant's experience with coming out.

When the interview was completed, the researcher gave the participant a list of resources if requested. This consisted of national crisis hotlines and several therapeutic/clinical agencies in Abilene, Texas where they could go to for help.

Interview Questions

1. Describe what your coming out experience was like.
2. How old were you when you came out?
3. Who did you tell before you told your family?
4. What feelings did you have about coming out?

5. Thinking about your coming out experience and your family for a moment, can you please tell me what you believe were the reasons for their response?
6. How did you realize you needed to come out?
7. What did you expect to happen when you came out?
8. Knowing the outcome, how would you go back and address coming out?
9. How do you feel after coming out to your family?
10. Who is your current support system?
11. Who in your family is supportive of you?
12. How did you wish your coming out would have gone?
13. How has coming out impacted you as an LGBTQ+ member?
14. How has the LGBTQ+ community been supportive of you?
15. What were the positive aspects that came from your coming out experience?
16. Would you like me to know anything else about you or your coming out experience?

After the Interview

The researcher transcribed the interview using Microsoft Word. Once all of the interviews were completed and transcribed, the researcher went over the data line by line and took memos about the experiences and process of coming out. Next the researcher reviewed the memos to find commonalities that would create an understanding of the lived experiences of the participants (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005). The data found allowed the researcher to create a description of the lived experience of the negative coming out process and the meanings derived from that experience. The transcripts were reviewed numerous times in an effort to find meaning and understanding of the content gathered by the researcher (Creswell, 2014; Giorgi, 1985). Through statements and

phrases that were significant, the researcher was able to find common factors that provided insight into what negative coming out experiences can be like.

Heidegger's interpretive phenomenology ideas were used in understanding and interpreting the data (Langdrige, 2007). There are three processes that are interwoven in this process, including interviews read over several times to come to a global analysis allowing for general categories to emerge from the study's findings, specific parts of the responses reviewed to try and capture meaning through these parts, and patterns or themes in the data identified to create an understanding of the meaning of their experience (Benner, 1996).

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Overview

Through four extensive interviews, the researcher was able to find eight major common themes that were brought up in a negative coming out experience, four minor themes that were experienced by three of the four participants in a negative coming out experience, and three positive outcomes from a negative coming out experience. These are not the only effects that come up for someone who is experiencing a negative coming out; they were, however, observed in this study. While each participant was different in their coming out experiences, they shared major and minor common themes and similarities with one another. Major common themes found throughout all four of the interviews were family religion, masking sexual orientation, family cut off, rational for response, implications on family, families' coping ability, feelings about coming out, and feelings after coming out. The minor common themes were experiences by three out of the four participants. These minor common themes were failed parenting, coming out tests, sexual orientation as a lifestyle, and fear. While this study was focused on the negative effects of coming out there were three positive effects; happiness, pride, and freedom.

Major Themes

Major themes within this study were experienced and expressed by all four of the participants. While these themes were all expressed by the participants, each participant had a unique experience with the themes.

Family Religion

Family religion was found as a factor in negative coming out experiences as expressed by the participants. The families of the participants were all religious and participants described them as being more on the conservative side of Christianity. Participant 1 (male) stated, “her [Participant 1’s mother] point of view and her values were threatened” later clarifying that she was a conservative Christian. Participant 2 (female) stated, “I grew up in a conservative Christian family. So, it’s very much against my parents’ and my sisters’ beliefs.” Participant 3 (male) stated, “I was raised in a very, very conservative religious home. My family is super conservative in a lot of ways. Participant 4 (female) stated, “They were conservative and very religious.” Each participant grew up in a home that was a conservative Christian household. Out of the four participants, two of them continue to attend church.

Masking Sexual Orientation

All four of the participants dated or married members of the opposite sex before coming out as LGBTQ+. Dating or marrying members of the opposite sex took place before coming out as a way to determine sexual orientation or to hide sexual orientation in order to blend into heteronormative society. Participant 1(male) stated, “I came from being married to a female trying to live the heterosexual lifestyle to cover up my own inner homosexuality...I didn’t want to be known as being gay.” Participant 2 (female)

stated, “I came out after being divorced from a man.” Participant 3 (male) stated, “I had dated a girl in high school. But when I came out, I tried to make it less of a blow to myself and everyone else by saying I was bisexual.” Participant 4 (female) stated, “I had dated guys before.” Participants had different reasons for dating or marrying someone of the opposite sex prior to coming out. For some it was internalized homophobia while others wanted to fit the mold that society and family set for them of marrying someone of the opposite sex.

Family Cutoff

Each of the four participants experienced a type of cutoff from family. While cutoff looks different for each of the participants’ families, it was a common theme throughout the four interviews. Cutoff was the family making a choice not to speak with them, communication being placed on hold with the participants, or family struggling to support or accept the participants. Participant 1 (male) stated, “She wasn’t accepting like she cried for a solid year, I had no communication with her. None whatsoever for the entire 12 months. It was bad.” Participant 2 (female) said, “My dad was furious and didn’t talk to me for a really long time. Participant 3 (male) said, “My stepdad told me I wasn’t allowed to live with him.” Participant 4 (female) said, “I knew my grandfather would disown me and that’s happened.” Communication has commenced again for many of the participants; however, losing the communication and family support after coming out impacted the participants and stuck with them after their coming out experiences.

Rational for Response

Each of the four participants tried to rationalize the reasonings for their family’s responses. Each participant was aware of the feelings their families possessed and coped

with the negative reactions by using rationalization. Participant 1 (male) said, “I understand my mom’s need to stand up and her point of view and her values were threatened.” Participant 2 (female) said, “Just their backgrounds of having a very conservative Christian background.” Participant 3 (male) said, “I think a lot of it had to do with their upbringing.” Participant 4 (female) said, “I had some head trauma...I was being treated as if I had schizophrenia.” Despite their family not being accepting, they still rationalized the negative experience showing care for their families.

Beliefs from Family

The families of the four participants responded to their coming out with thoughts on how the participant was going to impact the current family structure or how the participant was going to suffer in some way. Participant 1(male) said, “What are all of my friends in the neighborhood going to say? I was worried that for a while when my daughter became an adolescent that she was going to be a lesbian.” Participant 2 (female) said, “They believe it is their moral duty to let me know how wrong it is and that I should stop doing that like, therefore stop sinning.” Participant 3 (male) said, “He was scared that I was going to do something to the kids because I was gay.” Participant 4 (female) said, “I do fear that my dad feels I’m cursed to go to hell.”

Families’ Coping Ability

Every family responds to change in a variety of ways. The families of the participants used different tactics in order to cope with their family member being a member of the LGBTQ+ community and changing the heteronormative plans the family had for the participants. Participant 1(male) said, “No communication with her [Participant 1’s mother].” Participant 2 (female) said, “They didn’t talk about it or

address it. Nobody would even step inside (the house).” Participant 3 (male) said, “My aunt and I no longer speak.” Participant 4 (female) said, “And it wasn’t really broached again.” For the family members, not speaking about it was the choice in coping ability.

Feelings About Coming Out

A common theme found throughout the interviews was how a participant felt about coming out. Each participant had a different take on what coming out was going to be like. While the experience and view of how things should go was different, each person had their own take on how coming out would go, making this a common theme throughout the interviews. Participant 1 (male) said, “The biggest feeling I had was fear...I was petrified because I wanted to be accepted.” Participant 2 (female) said, “I felt really scared and really nervous. I had a lot of false hope that people would just support me.” Participant 3 (male) said, “I was scared, and I was confused, and I didn’t know how to process it.” Participant 4 (female) said, “I wasn’t ready for people to know.”

Feelings After Coming Out

The feelings after coming out are unique to the person that is coming out. Each of the participants experienced a different feeling after they had come out. Participant 1 (male) said, “Oh fantastic. I couldn’t hardly breathe.” Participant 2 (female) said, “It has hugely changed all of those relationships. My life wasn’t making sense...now I’ve been able to understand.” Participant 3 (male) said, “I felt relieved. And because of their reaction I felt less than human.” Participant 4 (female) said, “I was trying to work through some other things, so it got put on the backburner as a priority.” While the

thoughts might have been different, the participants all experienced feelings pertaining to their coming out experiences.

Minor Themes

While there were major themes found throughout the interviews, three minor themes showed up for three of the four participants as well. The minor themes made an impact in the negative coming out experiences of the participants and impacted the participants moving forward.

Failed Parenting

The thought of having a child that was a member of the LGBTQ+ community resulted in parents and one participant feeling like they had failed as a parent. Being a member of the LGBTQ+ community was seen as a direct link between how heterosexual conservative parents failed in bringing up their children. Participant 1 (male) stated, “She (participant 1’s mother) felt like she was a failure as a parent. What did I do wrong to make you be gay?” Participant 3 (male) said, “Why are you like this? What did I do wrong to make you this way?” Participant 4 (female) said, “My dad strongly believes that there’s evidence that the lack of male influence can cause this.” Parents want the best for their kids, and when the lives they envisioned for their children do not follow the way parents are expecting, acceptance of this change of course can be difficult for parents.

Coming Out Tests

Participants used someone outside of their families to have a trial coming out. Participants sought a friend or group of friends to come out to first as a way of testing how people around them viewed coming out as LGBTQ+. Participant 1 (male) stated, “I had three best friends.” Participant 2 (female) stated, “The first person I told was actually

a couple friends...and a counselor.” Participant 3 (male) said, “I told a random friend.” The coming out tests allowed for participants to judge how coming out would be. It allowed them to have a chance to practice.

Fear

For three of the four participants fear of rejection, family reaction, loss of support and loved ones, and fear of change kept them from coming out. Fear was expressed verbally by these participants about their coming out experiences. Participant 1 (male) said, “I was petrified almost. The biggest feeling I had was fear.” Participant 2 (female) stated, “I felt really scared.” Participant 3 (male) stated, “My biggest fear was how to tell them.” Fear kept participants from coming out sooner.

Positive Outcomes

Along with negative factors there was a constant positive effect that came from this experience, despite the negative outcomes. The participants were grateful that they were living true to themselves for the first time and could live life the way they wanted to. Coming out is not an easy process but upon doing so many are able to live life more openly. Some of the family members of the participants eventually came around to support and love them despite the differences in beliefs showing that time and understanding of the unknown can impact individuals in a positive way.

Pride

Despite having negative experiences, participants were proud of who they were. They did not want to go back and hide. None of the participants wanted to change their coming out, as it allowed them to be who they have always been, freely. “I was able to create a me I was proud of.” said Participant 1 (male). Participant 2 (female) stated, “I

could just be honest.” Participant 3 (male) mentioned, “I finally got to figure out who I am.” Participant 4 (female) expressed that, “I found a sense of belonging.” Many of the participants felt that they would have come out earlier if it would have been accepted. The participants were not ashamed of who they were nor did they try and hide who they were because they had spent too long hiding.

Happiness

Participants finally felt like they could be open about who they were which created a newfound happiness for the participants. Even with a negative coming out experience there can still be positive effects. Happiness seemed to come from being their authentic self and living life open. Participant 1(male) said, “Everyone deserves to be happy. And I never could have been the person I am if I never came out.” Participant 2 (female) revealed,” Not feeling like I was trying to explain things that didn’t make sense. It felt good. That’s been really nice.” Participant 3 (male) said, “I want me to be happy.” Participant 4 (female) said, “I was out! So, there was no question.”

While pride and happiness may seem similar, pride is fully accepting and loving one’s self as one is. Happiness is being able to see the joy in life and see the good things the world has to offer. It is being able to smile cheek to cheek and mean it.

Freedom

For the participants being out meant being free. It created a new understanding of who they were and what their life would look like. Although losing family was hard, the participants were free from a life of lies. Freedom meant being able to live life without the feeling of having to be a double agent. Participant 1(male) said, “I never had to live in the shadows to portray two lives. I never have to do anything but just be me.” It meant

not having to pretend a significant other was a friend with family. Participant 2 (female) said, “Having that relationship where she could be seen and acknowledged not like pretending, she was a friend.” Participant 3 (male) said, “Things are more open and receptive and caring and compassionate.” Participant 4 (female) said, “I was able to be honest with myself.”

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Discussion

The coming out process seems to be a stepping stone for LGBTQ+ individuals. This process is unique to each person and does not follow a set pattern for all members of this community. There are positive coming out experiences and negative coming out experiences. While it seems like some of the signs of a negative coming out could be dependent on the family religion or the family's views on the LGBTQ+ population that is not always a given. Religion does not dictate whether or not someone is going to be accepting of the LGBTQ+ population. The way someone comes out and when someone comes out should be decided on by that person.

The lack of support and love that LGBTQ+ members face is something that could be avoided when people open minds and hearts to other possibilities. While the negative coming out story was the focus of this study, hearing hardships of others is difficult to make meaning of when love is taught at a young age. Coming out should be met with love and acceptance even if this was not the life trajectory people had in mind for their family members. A little support can go a long way. Parents that struggle to accept their LGBTQ+ child could find a support group that would allow them to discuss their struggles. Parents can talk with their child about the support the child is needing despite not being accepting of the situation. LGBTQ+ members as well as their family members

can be more patient with each other. This is a process of acceptance for both parties.

While family members may never fully accept LGBTQ+ persons, they can still offer love and support.

For Clinicians

Clinicians should know that there is not and never was a template for members of this community to follow. There are many factors that play into a person's coming out. Those factors can include family, religion, age, life experience, and many other contributing factors. While many of these factors are out of the control of clinicians supporting the client through the process is obtainable. Clinicians can express to clients that writing down that they are LGBTQ+ or having feelings of attraction to the same sex could lead to someone finding out before they are ready. If the client feels like they need to write it down the clinician could keep it in their office, the client can leave it with someone they trust, or the client can write it in a secret code in order to protect their right to come out when they are ready.

As a clinician that works with this population, one needs to be careful to respect the confidentiality of these members. Having someone divulge their sexual orientation to you is a delicate situation and should be treated as such. Give clients space to explore their sexual orientation in a safe and healthy way, where there is no fear. Create a healthy environment where there is trust and security. Having a safe place to process and explore feelings or emotions can be one of the most helpful things a clinician can do for a client that is part of the LGBTQ+ community.

Limitations

This study was done with four participants when a typical phenomenological study has 5 to 15 participants. This study was done in Texas with the participants all being from Texas, so it may not be a complete representation of the greater United States LGBTQ+ population. There were no participants that were transgender, meaning the coming out process could look different for that subsection of the LGBTQ+ population. The researcher knew two of the participants, allowing for deeper discussion. Participants were only from conservative Christian homes, which may not be a complete representation of negative coming out experiences of individuals who are not Christian.

While people were interested in the study, ten of the perspective participants did not want to complete the in-depth interview after being emailed the questions. There are many different reasons for people not wanting to participate in the interview, including, not wanting to discuss a tough subject, being unwilling to discuss painful past experiences, feeling the study did not actually pertain to them, and many other possibilities the researcher will never know.

Contribution to Literature

This phenomenological study explored the negative effects of coming out as LGBTQ+ when there is a lack of familial support. This offers insight for researchers, therapists, and others who come into contact with this population. Understanding how a negative coming out experience can impact one's entire life can be helpful when working with LGBTQ+ clients. The lived experiences of these four participants was made possible through the in-person interviews and allowed for a deeper grasp on what it is like to come out in a non-supportive family. It is the hopes of the researcher that this

research will further conversations and research pertaining to the LGBTQ+ population to better help this community.

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APPENDIX A

International Review Board Approval Letter

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
325-674-2885



October 20, 2019

Ashley Hemphill
Department of Marriage and Family Studies
Abilene Christian University

Dear Ashley,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled "Effects of coming out as LGBTQ+ in a non-supportive family",

was approved by expedited review (Category 7) on 10/20/2019 (IRB # 19-090). Upon completion of this study, please submit the Inactivation Request Form within 30 days of study completion.

If you wish to make any changes to this study, including but not limited to changes in study personnel, number of participants recruited, changes to the consent form or process, and/or changes in overall methodology, please complete the Study Amendment Request Form.

If any problems develop with the study, including any unanticipated events that may change the risk profile of your study or if there were any unapproved changes in your protocol, please inform the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs and the IRB promptly using the Unanticipated Events/Noncompliance Form.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

Megan Roth

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs