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Structural Changes After Coming Out in a Christian Family

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, societal attention towards the LGBTQ community has grown significantly through social media and political movements. While research indicates increased acceptance and awareness, LGBTQ individuals and their families still face challenges, with "coming out" being a pivotal and ongoing difficulty. This study adopts a structural family therapy lens to investigate how the process of coming out impacts family dynamics, boundaries, and roles within Christian families. Existing literature underscores the role of religion, particularly Christianity, in causing stress for LGBTQ individuals. Although some families initially react negatively to disclosure, many eventually report improvement. However, there is limited research on both the process and its effects on families. This grounded theory study seeks to answer key questions about changes before and after coming out within Christian families and their impact on the family through a structural model. Understanding these dynamics before and after disclosure is crucial for clinicians and families to provide better support to LGBTQ individuals. The data analysis revealed a discernible pattern in the participants' coming-out journeys, with disclosure initially straining the relationship to its lowest point but subsequently leading to improvement. This process can be broadly classified into four phases: Hiding, Coming Out, Distancing, and Reconnecting.

Structural Changes After Coming Out in a Christian Family

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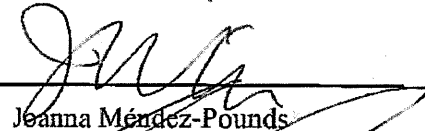
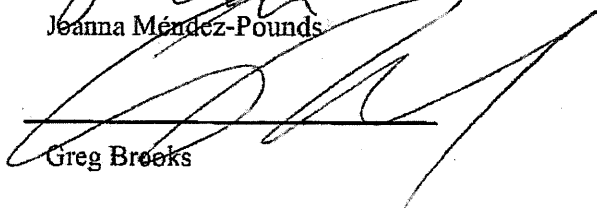Associate Provost for Residential Graduate Programs

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, people have paid increasingly more attention to the LGBTQ community through social media and political movements. Research shows people are more open to LGBTQ individuals and more aware of the struggle of this group compared to the past ten years (Drumm et al., 2021). Even though this attention has changed people's attitudes toward LGBTQ minorities, there are still many difficulties LGBTQ individuals must overcome. One of these ongoing and inescapable difficulties is coming out. Although often referred to as an "event," it is a process that includes LGBTQ individuals acknowledging and understanding their orientation and identity, reorganizing and accepting information over time, and finally sharing it with others. Researchers point out that it is an important milestone and developmental process for sexual orientation and gender identity minorities (Drumm et al., 2021).

Marriage and family therapists firmly believe that the family plays a vital role in shaping an individual's daily existence, including their personality, relationship patterns, and coping mechanisms. Family can serve as a powerful support system, helping individuals navigate through the most challenging times. Conversely, the family can also harbor painful memories that result in prolonged struggles. Therefore, it is crucial to examine how families react to disclosure events. Working from a structural family therapy lens, it is possible that coming out disrupts family dynamics, boundaries, and roles, which could lead to either positive or negative family functioning changes. While

many researchers have investigated the coming out process, none have examined the coming out process from a structural lens. Because family dynamics are impactful and structural changes can promote growth or deterioration, it is imperative to study and understand the evolving relationship dynamics for these minorities as they can either promote growth or result in deterioration.

Literature shows that the impact of coming out depends on the individual experience, with religion being the most significant factor that creates stress for LGBTQ individuals (Pistella et al., 2020; Reed et al., 2020; Sandler, 2022; Tyler et al., 2022; Zavala et al., 2021). For most families, coming out has a negative impact on the family at the beginning, but almost all families reported improvement with time (Reed et al., 2020). Unfortunately, for Christian LGBTQ individuals, coming out to family members almost always seems like a negative process, which might be affected by religion (Pistella et al., Reed et al., 2020; Sandler, 2022). However, researchers have rarely looked at both the process of coming out and the effect it has on families. The primary focus of this study will be to examine the process and changes experienced by Christian families when LGBTQ individuals come out. Specifically, this grounded theory study seeks to create a theory about how families change structurally after coming out and will answer these questions: 1) What happens when LGBTQ individuals come out to Christian parents and siblings? 2) What family dynamics change before and after LGBTQ individuals come out to Christian parents and siblings?

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The process of coming out as LGBTQ within Christian families is a significant and multifaceted event that holds great importance for both the individuals involved and their families. A crucial factor that influences this process is the response of family members to the disclosure. The reactions can lead to both positive and negative outcomes for LGBTQ individuals. Research has demonstrated that religion, particularly within the Christian context, can significantly impact the mental well-being of LGBTQ individuals, often resulting in adverse effects (Ali et al., 2019; Pistella et al., 2020). Although previous studies have examined the effects of coming out on families and individuals with a Christian background (Drumm et al., 2021; Reed et al., 2020; Van Bergen et al., 2021), this study aims to explore the process and its impact holistically, with particular attention to the changes in family dynamics and structures. By gaining a comprehensive understanding of these aspects, this study investigates the combined process and impact of LGBTQ individuals coming out within Christian families, with a particular emphasis on closely examining the changes that occur in family patterns and structures.

Coming Out

Sexual orientation refers to one's romantic and sexual attraction, which includes heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, or queer (Zavala et al., 2021). *Gender identity* is the internal beliefs about one's own gender, which could be female, male, non-binary, genderfluid, or others (Zavala et al., 2021). Sexual and gender minorities include

orientations and identities that society considers unusual or unexpected and are generally referred to as the "LGBTQ" community, which stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (Zavala et al., 2021). Disclosing sexual orientation or gender identity to others is called *coming out*. This has become an essential milestone in identity formation for LGBTQ individuals (Reed et al., 2020). Researchers find that coming-out processes start earlier for gender minorities than for sexual minorities. Gender identity begins forming at ages three or four and continues developing throughout young adulthood. However, for sexual minorities, orientation is often not noticed until early adolescence (Drumm et al., 2021).

For LGBTQ individuals, coming out can be the most challenging and essential event in their identity development. This complex experience often happens in their adolescence and college years (Reed et al., 2020). However, coming out is not a one-time event. It is a stressful, ongoing, lifelong process. Like all people, LGBTQ individuals will meet new people throughout their lives, which means they have to decide whether to come out every time they meet new people. Coming out is also a process of self-discovery that takes time. Some individuals may be unsure of their sexual orientation or gender identity and need time to explore these aspects before coming out to others (Ali et al., 2019). Therefore, the coming out audience needs to be non-judgmental and empathetic to affect LGBTQ individuals' identity formation and mental health positively. As a result, the coming out audience often may be LGBTQ individuals' best friends or family members (Pistella et al., 2020).

Pistella and peers (2020) found that for teenagers, LGBTQ individuals usually first come out at age 17, and typically, their best friend is their coming-out audience. It

took at least one year to come out to the family. Most LGBTQ individuals do not consider their family members as safe confidants. Most often, the first family member LGBTQ individuals try to disclose to is their mother; some would tell their siblings instead (Pistella et al., 2020). For sexual minorities, researchers found that lesbians were more likely to hide their sexual orientation from all significant others, especially their fathers and brothers, than gay men. This is possibly because it is harder for people to identify lesbians based on outward appearance. For example, people are less likely to guess a random woman on the street as LGBTQ even if they are lesbian; however, gay men are easier to identify (Pistella et al., 2020).

When LGBTQ individuals live or move to an environment where they feel unsafe or face discrimination, disclosure becomes a risky choice. It brings a handful of stress to their daily life. Therefore, they need to carefully assess the risks of coming out to others. Research shows that the ongoing coming out process creates interpersonal pressure, leading to negative thoughts or beliefs about themselves or their situation (Ali et al., 2019). For example, an LGBTQ individual who feels pressure to come out may experience thoughts such as being a burden to others, not being good enough, or never being accepted for who they are. These negative thoughts can be distressing for them. It can cause LGBTQ individuals to have anxiety, depression, or hopelessness. Coming out can also be challenging for individuals from families or social circles that are not friendly to LGBTQ identities. In these situations, individuals may remain closeted and avoid potential conflict or rejection (Ali et al., 2019). An example might be a transgender person trying to process their gender identity to family members. They may feel pressure

from their family to conform to gender norms and fear rejection or disapproval if they reveal their true gender identity.

On the other hand, studies also suggested that coming out to others is essential to forming a positive sense of self, which could bring higher life satisfaction, self-esteem, lower depression, and emotional relief (Drumm et al., 2021; Pistella et al., 2020). Positive disclosure experiences can also increase self-actualization and access to internal resources for LGBTQ individuals (Zavala et al., 2021). Self-actualization usually involves achieving personal growth, creativity, and fulfillment. Disclosing sexual orientation or gender identity to someone who responds in a positive and supportive way can make LGBTQ individuals feel more accepted and validated, which increases their sense of self-worth and allows them to live more authentically. Internal resources refer to the internal strengths and abilities of individuals, such as resilience, coping skills, and self-esteem. These resources can be drawn upon to cope with challenges and achieve goals. Positive disclosure experiences can increase access to internal resources by reducing stress and anxiety, improving self-esteem, and fostering a sense of social support (Zavala et al., 2021). Articles indicated that the family's response to an individual's disclosure of their sexual orientation or gender identity is a significant factor in predicting the positive outcomes of the experience (Drumm et al., 2021). For example, an LGBTQ individual who discloses their sexual orientation or gender identity to their family and receives a supportive and accepting response may feel validated, loved, and supported. As a result, it increases their sense of self-worth and leads to greater personal growth. Therefore, having a positive family response to LGBTQ individuals' disclosure benefits their mental health.

Coming Out for Family

The family is fundamental to human existence. People are born into a family, leave a family, and build a family. Systemic therapists view family as the originator of behavior patterns, an important support system that offers a safe haven for life's stresses and possibly the root of personal dysfunction. The family is the first social institution where individuals learn gender and sexuality norms. As such, parents play a crucial role in LGBTQ psychosocial well-being (Sandler, 2022). Support from parents and family is the strongest predictor of self-acceptance, reducing the likelihood of children experiencing mental distress (Reed et al., 2020). In addition, the parent's role is particularly prominent during adolescence and will continuously shape children's adulthood and later life. Therefore, coming out to family members is essential in the self-identification process for sexual and gender minorities (Van Bergen et al., 2021). From a systemic viewpoint, family members could be a robust support system for people. At the same time, families could also be the direct or indirect cause of traumatic experiences.

Unfortunately, it is still typical for LGBTQ individuals to face rejection rather than acceptance after revealing their identity to their family members (Pistella et al., 2020). For example, they could receive emotional rejection like anger, disgust, or disappointment from their family members, which can make LGBTQ individuals feel ashamed or guilty about their identity. Second, family members may distance themselves from the individual or refuse to acknowledge their identity, leading to a breakdown in family relationships. Third, family members may also respond with physical violence or threats, which can physically and emotionally harm the individual. And finally, family members may withhold financial support, such as college tuition or living expenses, as a

means of punishment or control as a rejection of LGBTQ individuals. In these cases, the rejection of the parents or family members negatively impacts LGBTQ individuals, especially in youth identity development and mental health (Pistella et al., 2020).

The disagreement about one's sexual and gender identity can cause significant conflict in the family. LGBTQ individuals often replace their family or origin with others to build their new family if the conflict continues. The reconstruction of the family often happens after LGBTQ individuals leave or are emotionally and physically distant from their family of origin (Sandler, 2022). The worries and fear of rejection from family could be a reason for LGBTQ youth to report hesitation in coming out to their parents and might often come out to their best friends or siblings first (Pistella et al., 2022).

After coming out, most parents go through an acceptance journey, including shock, surprise, confusion, and stress. Those reactions can lead to negative consequences for the disclosing individual because they most likely perceive the reaction as rejection. However, many findings indicate that the initial adverse family reaction can shift to acceptance and support (Sandler, 2022). Compared to the father's reaction, the mother reported being more likely to respond positively. On the other hand, some data show that mothers can react more negatively than fathers because they have stronger emotions, such as concern, anger, and guilt (Pistella et al., 2020).

Altogether, having an LGBTQ child can have a massive impact on the family. The disclosure event can be a significant stressor for the family members who try to reconcile their beliefs about sexual orientation and gender identity and respond appropriately to their kids with love. Like LGBTQ individuals, coming out is also a long-term process for the family.

Coming Out with Parents

Studies show that parental evaluation heavily influences young people's self-perception in this developmental stage (Van Bergen et al., 2021). As a result, coming out could lead individuals to experience higher levels of depression, psychological distress, and lower self-esteem (Drumm et al., 2021). In fact, in one study, researchers found that more than half (56%) of the participants believe that coming out worsens the relationship with their parents (Feinstein et al., 2018). Therefore, therapists should pay more attention when individuals come out to their families.

Studies find that most sexual minority children often expect their parents to react negatively to their disclosure (Reed et al., 2020). Unfortunately, parents often confirm this expectation in the initial coming-out conversation. In another study, researchers found that parents who reject, try to change LGBTQ children's identity, or have negative comments about LGBTQ people in the home are linked to both increased withdrawal of the LGBTQ children from their family and a heightened risk for experiencing significant mental health challenges (Drumm et al., 2021).

It is normal for LGBTQ individuals to report their parent-children relationships worsening after they disclose them to their parents. Moreover, LGBTQ individuals most likely perceive the relationship worsened because their parents rejected them. However, researchers found that parents often view the disclosure event differently. Pistella and peers (2020) indicated that the gender and age of the children disclosed an influencing factor for parent's reactions. Adverse reactions more likely happened when the disclosing individual was the same gender as the parent, and data status parents have more significant concerns about gay sons. In addition, both parents tend to respond more

negatively to younger children than young adults (Pistella et al., 2020). The phenomenon is understandable because parents will never think about the development of young children and young adults; they know their children should and can make their own decisions, which is valid for all parents and children, regardless of LGBTQ family.

According to the report, more than half of the parents already knew, or at least one of them knew, about children's sexual orientation and gender identity before the disclosure event. Moreover, most of the parents did not fully accept the sexual orientation/gender identity of their children (Pistella et al., 2020). It is pervasive that LGBTQ individuals agree that their parents would tolerate that but not fully accept it. In the same study, researchers also found that the lack of an established close relationship with parents is the primary reason for an individual not to disclose. Many participants in the study reported that they would never let one of the parents know who they are (Pistella et al., 2020). Some researchers indicated that parents have been espousing the LGBTQ experience, such as having friends who identify as LGBTQ individuals would be more open to the conversation (Reed et al., 2020).

On the other hand, some individuals found their disclosure to parents positive. One participant in Reed and peers' (2022) study recorded the mother sitting, listening, and asking questions during the disclosure. The father was more hesitant to talk about it because he did not want to offend the LGBTQ kids or break their good relationship. This participant considers their mother the closest human being in the world and points out that both parents' reactions support him (Reed et al., 2020). Furthermore, parents and children could see the reaction very differently. In Tyler and peers' (2022) study, a mother considers telling the daughter not to come out to her grandparents as protection

from outside prejudice, but the daughter firmly refutes this response. She only perceived it as rejection and invalidated her identity. This is not a unique phenomenon; many dyadic data show parents and LGBTQ individuals provided the information differently. Another example in a different study would be a mother who did not want to upset or offend her child by asking about their sexual or gender identity. The children were frustrated after they found out their parents knew about it because of the lack of engagement from parents during their identity development. They see that as unnecessary suffering because their parents already know but never bring it up. In the same study, certain participants expressed the sentiment that the parent had overlooked an opportunity for support. They indicated that it would have significantly eased their life if their parents had acknowledged their sexual orientation, affirming that they could embrace their true selves and find happiness (Van Bergen et al., 2021). Researchers should pay attention to both sides of the story.

Instead of avoiding the conversation or pretending not to notice the change, some parents ask their children first before they spontaneously come out. Some participants recorded that their parents were "fishing" them. In some cases, they could even feel they had a "cross-examination" by their parents (Van Bergen et al., 2021). It depends on how the individual feels about parents' suspicion; however, when the conversation feels more like a "cross-examination," it is always seen as an adverse reaction. In other cases, people tend to appreciate the conversation. Similarly, an individual would view silence differently from their parents. Some people see silence as a rejection and are unwilling to accept silence from their parents even though they are struggling because it is a taboo topic for them. Some feel their parents are silent because they do not know how to

communicate this topic, but it does not necessarily mean rejection. Often, people get silence or complicated reading responses from their father while the mother confirms the father's silence due to insecurity about the parent-child relationship. Data also indicates that parents with no suspicion were more likely to react silently. Due to the espousing of media and legal attention for the LGBTQ community, the insight into realizing their children are different has increased (Van Bergen et al., 2021).

In the same study, Van Bergen and peers (2021) reported that many participants reported that their parents' reaction was ambivalent. For example, some parents do not support and might criticize LGBTQ values, but they still express love for their LGBTQ children. In this case, children would separate from their parents to create distance in choosing their lifestyle. Another typical ambivalent reaction is that the parents accept the children as LGBTQ individuals, but LGBTQ topics are not allowed to be discussed in the house (Van Bergen et al., 2021). On the other side, the experience of parents with LGBTQ kids is hard, too. In many cases, a child's disclosure represents losing the identity of their children, especially for parents of transgender children (Tyler et al., 2022). For those parents, the feeling of loss might be as significant as losing their child, even though the child is still there. At the same time, parents also need to make room for a new identity for themselves to become LGBTQ parents.

Coming Out with Sibling

Siblings are also considered essential family members and often are the first coming out audience within the family. One explanation is that LGBTQ individuals are not emotionally or financially dependent on their siblings, so they have less fear of disappointing their siblings and feel less guilt (Sandler, 2022). In other cases, some

individuals have more secure relationships with siblings than parents, so they first disclose to siblings (Pistella et al., 2022). Having more equality and less power with their siblings also makes it easier to disclose (Grafsky et al., 2018).

LGBTQ individuals may also come out to siblings to test other family members' reactions, especially before disclosing to parents. LGBTQ individuals use the sibling relationship to measure how well the family will deal with the disclosure (Jenkins, 2008). Even in the most supportive family, siblings can feel stress and tension after the coming out event. Moreover, the article shows that the siblings' reactions were not very accepting. The majority of the siblings felt shocked, disappointed (Hilton et al., 2011), or devastated (Jenkins, 2008). However, sibling rejection was less devastating than parental rejection (Hilton et al., 2011). In other cases, those supportive and loving siblings are the conjunction between LGBTQ individuals and parents or other loved ones; the loving siblings help LGBTQ individuals understand and deal with the transition information (Grafsky et al., 2018; Jenkins, 2008).

Recent research data show that about half of the siblings already knew what was happening before the disclosure. For those with more than one sibling, the more siblings they have, the more they know an individual's orientation and identity (Pistella et al., 2020). The study also found that first-born LGBTQ individuals are more likely to disclose to their parents than other youth. This could happen due to the age difference because they could be more independent and have more advance in the identity development process than later-born individuals. Another reason for not disclosing to siblings could be fear of influencing younger siblings or worry about younger siblings getting bullied in school (Pistella et al., 2020).

As with parents, siblings who supported the LGBTQ community before the disclosure were more open to discussing and accepting their sibling's sexual orientation and gender identity (Hilton et al., 2011). It is also common for supportive siblings to be protective. Several siblings reported feeling angry, frustrated, and disappointed when their parents rejected their LGBTQ sibling's disclosure. In most cases, brothers and sisters get closer after the LGBTQ sibling comes out. Both LGBTQ individuals and their siblings tend to bond and show caring for others (Grafsky et al., 2018). Moreover, several articles indicated that those with a negative relationship with siblings after the disclosure event were not close before the disclosure (Grafsky et al., 2018; Hilton et al., 2011; Pistella et al., 2020).

Coming Out and Christian Faith

Another lens people have been paying attention to in the LGBTQ community is religion, especially the Christian faith. Religion is the primary factor of negative influences on LGBTQ society. It is almost certain that if an LGBTQ individual comes out to a Christian family, the impact would be devastating for the individual and the whole family for a long time (Reed et al., 2020).

Christianity

Christianity is a monotheistic religion based on the Bible. There are many variations of beliefs within Christianity, and different denominations emphasize different aspects of the faith. Some of the major branches of Christianity include Catholicism, Protestantism, and Orthodox Christianity. Within each of these branches, there are numerous denominations and subgroups that have differing beliefs on theological and social issues. Christianity is characterized by a division between liberal and conservative

believers regarding sexuality. One area of disagreement among Christians is in their teachings about LGBTQ individuals. Some Christians believe that homosexuality is a sin and that same-sex relationships are morally wrong, while others believe that God loves and accepts all people, including LGBTQ individuals, and that same-sex relationships can be holy and loving (Hunt, 2009; Minix, 2018).

LGBTQ with Christian Background

LGBTQ individuals with a Christian background usually struggle with their identity process because it is often viewed as "sinful" to be an LGBTQ person. Sandler (2022) found that LGBTQ individuals with a Christian background have to either invalidate their religious or sexual/gender identity (Sandler, 2022; Van Bergen et al., 2021). Most would either integrate both or reject one identity and go along with others. Those who integrate both identities would persuade themselves that God played a role in their sexual/gender awakening and that what they should do is trust in God's plan. Others either pray away their sexual and gender identity or turn down their religious activity along with the LGBTQ community (Sandler, 2022).

Moreover, religious LGBTQ individuals frequently experience rejection and have no family support. As a result, sometimes people choose never to come out to their family. Parents could experience guilt, grief, isolation or anger, and denial of the initial disclosure event. The parent-child relationship is more likely to get strained. However, many parents can find resolution and peace with their LGBTQ child eventually, no matter if they are religious or not (Drumm et al., 2021; Reed et al., 2020).

Regarding the disclosed event with a Christian background, LGBTQ individuals have a variety of experiences. While some see coming out as successful because it went

better than expected, most people find it difficult and awkward. Others find it totally negative (Reed et al., 2020). Those who thought it was difficult and awkward reported having positive and negative experiences. Some people record topic shifts after the disclosure. For example, it shifts from sexual orientation disclosure to equal rights for everyone (Reed et al., 2020).

From LGBTQ personal development lens, Drumm and peers (2021) state that children from a Christian background are more likely to lose their faith or leave the church after coming out. However, they also indicated that the parent-child relationship could shift positively among Christian parents and LGBTQ children. Among Christian background LGBTQ individuals, they mention expressing unconditional love, passing the time, communicating openly with parents and creating distance, and being independent of parents are helpful. People reported that parents who express their unconditional love do not necessarily mean acceptance but would provide stability during the adjustment period, which helps all family members go through a difficult time. Moreover, as with the individual identity-forming process, family members also need time to process information (Drumn et al., 2021; Worman & Kartch, 2022). As LGBTQ topics are not discussed or only discussed in terms of being sinful in the church, families need more time and discussion to process what coming out means to them personally, socially, and spiritually, and eventually, things will get better. The last option for LGBTQ individuals to interact with family is to create physical and emotional distance. Sometimes, avoidance is also a way to decrease tension and stress (Drumn et al., 2021).

Family Structural Model and Dynamic Changes

This study focuses on the changes in family dynamics that occur after LGBTQ individuals disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity to their Christian family members. A systemic perspective can help to understand these changes by linking them to the family structural model. The family structural model is a form of family therapy focusing on the family's organization and structure. The family structure encompasses various elements, such as subsystems, hierarchies, and boundaries, which are crucial for understanding the dynamics within a family system from a systemic perspective (Minuchin, 1974). Over time, these interactional patterns develop within the family as members interact and react to each other. Implicit or explicit roles, rules, boundaries, and hierarchy make up the family structure, and their functionality or disruption can significantly impact the family system (Gehart, 2017).

Subsystems, smaller units within the larger family system, hold differing levels of power and influence (Minuchin, 1974). For instance, parents occupy executive positions in the family hierarchy, illustrating the varying authority levels. Eddy et al. (2021) identified three major subsystems within a family: spousal, parental, and sibling. Hierarchical structures are essential for the effective functioning of a family system. If hierarchies are too rigid, children may lack a sense of guidance, while ineffective hierarchies can lead to power struggles within the family (Eddy et al., 2021). In the context of an LGBTQ child's family, maintaining an appropriate hierarchy is essential. It is important to provide a nurturing environment where the child feels supported and can explore their identity, interests, and abilities. On the other hand, an ineffective hierarchy can lead to power struggles within the family. When children possess more power than

the parental subsystem, they may challenge rules, boundaries, and parental authority. This can result in behavioral problems and a lack of respect for authority figures.

To comprehend the structure of a family, it is also important to examine the roles, rules, and boundaries within the family system. Roles and rules exist within individuals, subsystems, and the family as a whole and can be either explicit or implicit (Minuchin, 1974). Boundaries, which define the separation between individuals, subsystems, and the larger environment, play a vital role in establishing and reinforcing these roles and rules. Boundaries can be emotional or physical in nature and encompass the rules governing participation and roles within each subsystem (Minuchin, 1974). Structural family therapy categorizes boundaries as clear, rigid, or diffuse (Gehart, 2017). Rigid and diffuse boundaries create dysfunction within the family structure.

In the case of an LGBTQ child's family, parents who are overworked may frequently leave their children home alone. At the same time, these children may develop sexual orientation or gender identity. While this may promote the child's autonomy and self-sufficiency in navigating their identity, it may also create a lack of emotional and physical support from the parents. Consequently, the child may perceive their parents as distant and uninvolved, leading to dysfunction and a diminished sense of parental authority. Conversely, diffuse boundaries characterize enmeshed subsystems and hinder children's independence (Eddy et al., 2021). In a family system with diffuse boundaries, a mother may be unable to make child-rearing decisions without input from her own mother. Dysfunction arises if the other parent is excluded from decision-making, as they may feel excluded from the parental subsystem.

Structural therapy emphasizes that problems arise when a family's structure becomes rigid, inflexible, or poorly defined (Gehart, 2017). When a child in a Christian household comes out as LGBTQ, it can disrupt the existing family structure, causing significant changes in roles, rules, and boundaries. Examining these changes through a family structural lens provides valuable insights into how families with LGBTQ children navigate the adjustment process. This study aims to investigate the process and changes experienced by Christian families when LGBTQ individuals come out, particularly focusing on the impact on family dynamics and structure. By examining these dynamics through a structural family therapy lens, the study seeks to understand how coming out disrupts family dynamics, boundaries, and roles, and whether these changes lead to positive or negative family functioning. The ultimate goal is to develop a theory about how families change structurally after coming out, providing valuable insights for therapists to better support these families in fostering healthy adaptations and promoting positive dynamics amidst the transformative experience of a child's disclosure. By understanding the impact on the family structure, therapists can better support these families in fostering healthy adaptations and promoting positive dynamics amidst the transformative experience of a child's disclosure.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The coming-out process for LGBTQ individuals in Christian families is a complex and essential event that can profoundly impact both the individual and their family. One of the critical predictors is the family member's response. The disclosure could cause both positive and negative outcomes for LGBTQ individuals. Studies also show that religion, especially Christianity, is essential in adverse mental health outcomes for LGBTQ individuals. While previous research has explored the impact of coming out on families and individuals with a Christian background, this study examines the process and impact together, paying close attention to the changes in family patterns and structures.

This study looks at changes through the structural family model, and the researcher will use a grounded theory methodology to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the coming out experience for LGBTQ individuals in Christian families by examining the structural changes before and after the disclosure event. The researcher would focus on the processes and changes that occur within Christian families when LGBTQ individuals come out and how these experiences change family members' roles, boundaries, communication patterns, and relationships. Through understanding the before and after disclosure event process, the researcher hopes clinicians will hopefully provide better help and intervention for LGBTQ minorities and their families and can also help families understand and support their LGBTQ loved ones.

Methods

Grounded theory research aims to generate theories grounded in data and explain people's experiences and behaviors in a particular social context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This research methodology involves a systematic and flexible approach to collecting and analyzing qualitative data in order to construct theories that are firmly rooted or "grounded" in the data itself. Instead of relying on preconceived hypotheses or rigid rules, grounded theory provides researchers with general principles and heuristic devices to guide their investigation (Charmaz, 2014). It is particularly useful for exploring complex social phenomena and generating theories to guide further research or inform practice. The goal of ground theory research includes exploring the experiences of a phenomenon, understanding the processes of phenomena formation, investigating the social processes and dynamics of formation, analyzing the experiences and processes, and developing theories to explain how the phenomena form. In this method, the data serve as the foundation of the theory-building process, and the data analysis generates the concepts that form the theoretical framework. Grounded theory researchers utilize interviews to gather data and construct their theories. They collect data right from the start of a project, aiming to understand the dynamics and experiences within the research settings they engage with and gain insights into the lives of the research participants (Charmaz, 2014). The interviewee's experience, words, and life events are analyzed and categorized to facilitate their summary and systematic organization to comprehend the phenomenon's underlying process. As a result, the researcher would find categorized elements for the phenomena contributing to the final presented theory (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The researcher chose this methodology for the study because prior research indicated family change happened after LGBTQ individuals came out. It is essential to understand what change occurred in the family. In addition, how and when the change happened.

Participants

The researcher recruited five participants who identify as LGBTQ. To be included in the study, participants must meet the following criteria: 1) they identity as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer, or as another sexual or gender minority; 2) they grew up in a Christian family; 3) they have come out to all of their immediate family member or household members; and 4) they are between the ages of 18 and 45 to control for generational effects. Because the challenges LGBTQ individuals face are very different based on their age and generation, this study is only focused on current LGBTQ individuals' experiences. Moreover, the idea of the "Christian family" is vague; the researcher considers the "Christian family" as participants identifying their family as a Christian family with evidence of regular church attendance, prayer among family members, and/or other spiritual activity in the house.

The researcher employed convenience sampling by collaborating with the leadership of local LGBTQ support and advocacy groups to disseminate announcements via email to their members. Additionally, the researcher utilized social media platforms such as Facebook to post study posters. The local LGBTQ support group is VOICE, which is a peer education and support group for LBGTQ students at Abilene Christian University (ACU). The group has not functioned as an advocacy group or as a typical student organization or club but for students who identify as LGBTQ individuals to feel

safe and able to talk through issues regarding faith and sexuality. There is no compensation for participants.

The study comprised five participants, representing diverse backgrounds and demographics. Three participants were undergraduate students at ACU in Texas, one was a master's-level alumna from the same institution, and the fifth participant hailed from Tennessee, having previously attended a Baptist university for their undergraduate studies. The participants identified with various sexual orientations, including two pansexual individuals, one bisexual individual, one gay individual, and one lesbian individual. In terms of gender identity, the group comprised two females, two genderqueer individuals, and one non-binary participant. Age distribution among the participants varied, with two falling within the 22–25 age range, two within the 18–21 category, and one participant aged 30–35. Regarding their household religions, two participants reported being raised in the Church of Christ, one participant was raised Catholic, with a Catholic mother and a non-dimensional father. Two participants grew up in non-dimensional churches, with one participant noting that she believes her family members were baptized rather than non-denominational.

Screening and Consent Procedures

Participants responded to the announcement by clicking on a link to a Google Form. Participants first reviewed the informed consent and consent to participate by checking a box indicating their consent. After reading and agreeing to the informed consent, the form will screen participants with the following five yes-no questions: 1) Do you identify as an LGBTQ individual? 2) Were you raised in a Christian family, as evidenced by regular church attendance, prayer amongst family members, and/or seeing

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family members read the Bible? 3) Have you come out to all your immediate family or household members? 4) Are you between the ages of 18 and 45? If participants answered yes to all four questions, they were directed to a demographic survey to collect the following information: bio-gender, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, and church denomination. After the demographic survey, participants provided their contact information, including their name and phone number, for the researcher to schedule the interview. Participants who answered no to the screening questions were directed to a page thanking them for their willingness to participate and noting that they do not qualify. Participation was voluntary, and participants could end their participation at will.

Data Collection

The researcher interviewed participants face-to-face in the Marriage and Family Institute (MFI) located at ACU or via Zoom, and interviews lasted 45–120 minutes. The researcher encouraged participants to select a private location if they had the interview on Zoom. The interviewer built a genogram with the participants before asking them grand tour questions. The three grand tour questions were: 1) What was your relationship with each of your family members before you came out? 2) When did you come out to each of the family members? 3) What is your relationship with each of your family members now? The researcher used the sub-questions in Appendix B to elicit details about specific aspects of their experiences, such as their family member's response during disclosure. The researcher also used follow-up questions such as "Can you say more about that?" to gather additional details and not take their meaning for granted.

If the interview was via Zoom, the researcher audio and video recorded the session with Zoom. A backup voice recorder was also kept on the phone as an extra

precaution. The researcher used their phone for face-to-face interviews to voice record the whole session. Even though the MFI has a video recording system, the researcher did not use it due to the recording file's quality. After the interview, the researcher downloaded the audio file and uploaded it to Otter for transcription. The researcher then reviewed transcripts for accuracy and removed identifying information (names, cities, workplaces, etc.). The MFI stores the transcripts, consents, recordings, and other related information for three years and destroys them after with a privacy guarantee on the information for the participants.

Data Analysis

As data were gathered, the interviewer focused towards asking questions that explored the relationship between the individual and their family members, rather than strictly adhering to the grounded tour question guide. Because this is grounded theory research, the researcher took time to memo and code after each interview before starting the following interview. The researcher took notes during the interview and reintegrated information afterward. The researcher documented those notes in the memo Word document.

The first coding phase aimed to narrow down the transcript for efficiency with later data analysis and identify anything that could be relevant or important. At this stage, the researcher tried to code as closely as possible to the transcript's content, line by line. The researcher read through the transcripts and gathered the change process of family relationships before and after LGBTQ individual disclosures for coding. The researcher used Word documents for initial coding. After initial coding, the researcher would memo the thoughts, impressions, and transparent processes.

The researcher focused on coding during the second coding phase. After coding the second interview, the researcher compared the codes with the first interview, noticing which codes were similar across interviews and might describe a similar aspect of the experience process, such as feeling distanced before they came out to their family members. Through comparison, the researcher formed categories (e.g., post-disclosure close relationship and after-disclosure estranged relationship) and then re-coded the transcripts using the newly formed categories.

After the researcher completed each coding phase, they adjusted the interview and repeated the process. Once satisfied with the categories, the researcher finished the analysis by finding the limits or boundaries of a category (what defines the relationship as getting closer instead of staying the same), combining or splitting classes (does the increase of talking means increased trust), creating sub-categories (time effect on relationship), and identifying new data (new family structure, parents and sibling are closer). It is important to note that the goal of this research is not to produce generalizable results. Instead, it is to provide detailed descriptions of what happened to a Christian family after their child's disclosure that they are LGBTQ individuals.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of this study is due to external audits, thick descriptions, and peer review. The study started and finished with a thesis advisor. The advisor stayed close to each stage of the research and provide feedback to the researcher. The was is also documented using an audit trail. Last but not least, the researcher included a thick description of each category, which means using detailed descriptions, quotes, and

concrete examples of the process. All the criteria listed will ensure the results are analyzed correctly and avoid any biases that may have affected the results.

Furthermore, the researcher's personal connections and experiences have deeply influenced their interest in studying this topic. As a student in a Christian school, the researcher has been immersed in discussions about LGBTQ families and has observed LGBTQ student group therapy sessions in the clinic. Additionally, attending a conference focusing on the impact of LGBTQ issues on Christian parents further ignited their curiosity and passion for understanding the experiences of LGBTQ individuals within Christian families. Witnessing firsthand the challenges and struggles faced by LGBTQ individuals and their families in reconciling their identities and faith has prompted the researcher to delve deeper into this area of research. The researcher was motivated to contribute to the existing knowledge base and explore avenues to enhance support and intervention for LGBTQ minorities and their families, particularly within Christian communities.

On a personal level, the researcher has undergone a process of re-evaluating one's own beliefs about the LGBTQ community, particularly within the framework of Christian background. While the researcher may not have personally "come out," engaging with this topic through research has prompted introspection and a deeper understanding of own perspectives and biases. Choosing this topic was not solely an academic pursuit but also a personal journey to explore and challenge individual's own thinking regarding Christianity and LGBTQ issues. Through this process, the researcher has gained insight into the complexities of identity, faith, and acceptance within both the LGBTQ

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community and Christian contexts, strengthening their commitment to advocating for inclusivity and understanding.

By conducting this study, the researcher hopes to bridge the gap between research and clinical practice, providing valuable insights that can inform and guide clinicians in better understanding and assisting LGBTQ individuals and their families within Christian settings. The researcher aspires that this research will foster greater understanding, empathy, and acceptance, ultimately contributing to more inclusive and supportive environments for LGBTQ individuals within Christian communities.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The data analysis revealed a discernible pattern in the participants' coming-out

journeys. Researchers observed that disclosing one's identity to a Christian family

initially strained the relationship to its lowest point. Despite this, all individuals reported

a subsequent improvement in their relationships with family members. This process can

be broadly classified into four phases: Hiding, Coming Out, Distancing, and

Reconnecting. See Figure 1 for a depiction of the model.

Figure 1

Model of Structural Change Before and After Coming Out in a Christian Family
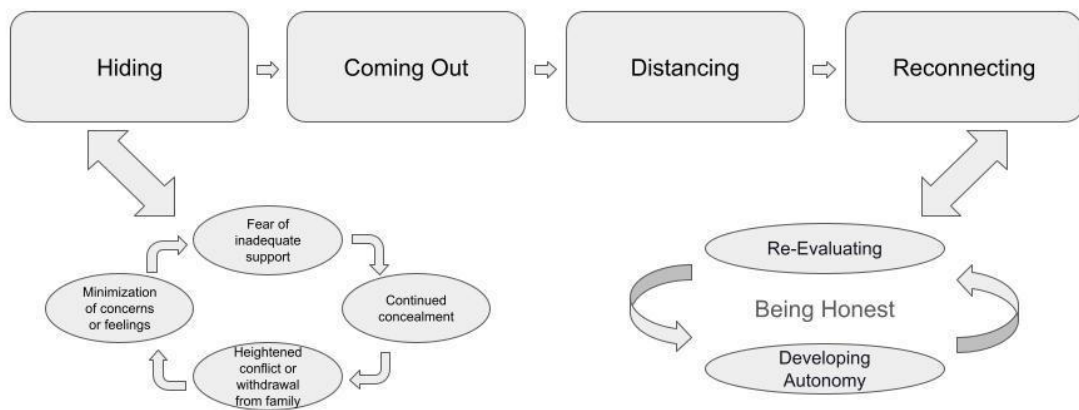
Phase 1: Hiding

Prior to coming out, all participants not only concealed their sexual

orientation/identity but also their feelings and concerns from their family members. This

concealment often led to mental health issues, conflicts within relationships, and feelings

of isolation. Three out of five participants disclosed experiencing sexual or physical abuse prior to their coming-out events, with two reporting abuse from a household member. None of these participants felt adequately supported by their parents.

A participant who experienced sexual abuse perpetrated by an older sibling, described the tension within the family:

It caused much tension with my family because they were terrified for his well-being and scared that his future was going to be hurt or that people were going to find out. It caused a lot of tension because I needed someone to be there for me, but they were so scared about him and his future. They kind of didn't listen to me until things resurfaced sophomore year.

Another participant, still struggling to communicate with their mother, shared:

I hate it when [my mother] touches me, but that probably is linked to the whole serial boyfriend dating thing that she did. Because one of them hit me, and she just watched. There's just a real lack of trust there. So, that's probably the relationship that was damaged the most.

A participant who was sexually assaulted by boyfriend as a minor recounted:

I became pregnant from the rape and then subsequently miscarried the baby. Of course, it all came out. My parents intervened. They were really upset because they were afraid my dad would lose his job as a preacher because I was having premarital sex, which was a much bigger concern to my family than me reporting non-consensual sexual abuse.

In many cases, parents attempted to minimize the significance of the abuse, exacerbating feelings of lack of support among the participants. The researcher noted a

recurring pattern regardless of whether participants had experienced abuse. This pattern involved the minimization of concerns or feelings, leading to a fear of inadequate support, continued concealment, and heightened conflict or withdrawal from family members.

A participant who did not experience abuse described the tension within their conservative family:

During my high school years and the first year of college, there was a lot of fighting with my family and arguing where they're very conservative. I'm more liberal, and that was one of the causes of tension between us, as well as not communicating. And so, during high school and my first year of college, going home was not safe. I did not want to go home.

Another participant, who did not report abuse, highlighted the challenges in communicating with their emotionally reactive mother:

So my mom is very emotionally reactive to everything. So it feels like everyone in the family is walking on eggshells to keep her from getting upset. So that makes it really hard to be honest with her. Because we're constantly having to protect her from her own feelings, and this is really tiring and really frustrating when no one else sees the damage that she does. I think if my mom weren't such a reactive person, I would have come out much younger. But I knew I couldn't come out in high school because I might get kicked out. And I needed a place to stay. So I came out during college because I knew I still had a dorm.

These dynamics contributed to heightened mental health concerns among participants, as the lack of support and understanding from family members exacerbated

existing emotional distress. The fear of rejection and the need to conceal one's identity and experiences led to a cycle of internalized stigma and self-doubt, further impacting participants' psychological well-being. Moreover, the ongoing conflicts within familial relationships and the inability to openly communicate added additional layers of stress and anxiety. Overall, the complex interplay between concealment, minimization of concerns, and strained family dynamics underscored the significant challenges individuals face navigating the coming-out process within Christian families, highlighting the critical need for increased support and acceptance within these environments.

Phase 2: Coming Out

Phase 2 entails the coming-out event itself. In this phase, the researcher separated the coming-out process into two categories: the first involves coming out to their parents, and the second involves coming out to their siblings. Three participants reported coming out to their siblings before coming out to their parents. The rest of them came out to their siblings when they were outed by their parents.

Coming Out to the Parents

Three out of five participants were outed to their parents. In comparison, the remaining two participants, who voluntarily disclosed their orientation/identities, were motivated by a desire to conceal their true selves no longer. Regardless of how the participants' coming-out was initiated, whether voluntary or involuntary, all reported feelings of rejection and distance from their parents, irrespective of the parent's level of support.

The coming-out event was described as "devastating," "horrible," or "nerve-wracking" by all participants with at least one parent, with some likening it to "the end of

the world." Despite attempts at support from parents, some participants expressed skepticism regarding sincerity. For instance, one participant initially doubted the sincerity of her mother's supportive message, stating, "At first, I felt like she [mother] was not being sincere in telling me that she loves me and wants to be open about it."

Most participants reported that their parents' reactions were not supportive. Examples included a mother throwing a wine glass at her child, resulting in injury, and others being grounded, punished, or even kicked out of the house after disclosure. One participant's experience involved being grounded and exiled to her aunt's house, where attempts were made to convert her back to heterosexuality. Upon being outed again later, she was financially and physically cut off by her parents.

There was also a participant who disclosed their bisexuality to parents who, despite having a gay family member, denied the participant's sexual orientation. Their mother's reaction was marked by disbelief and indifference, with questions centered around the ability to still marry a man and a dismissal of the importance of bisexuality. The participant's attempt to come out to their father was met with skepticism from the mother.

Despite their obstacles, some participants expressed mixed emotions about their coming-out experiences. One participant who came out voluntarily reflected, "But afterward, I know I was hurt but also satisfied. Because I finally got their actual honest opinion on weirdness." This sentiment was echoed later in the interview when she said,

> It was just nice to say what I'd been keeping in for years. It was nice to say it out
>
> loud. It was nice to make them mad. Because whenever you're constantly trying

to accommodate someone's emotions and keep someone happy, you get tired of seeing them happy. Yeah. So satisfying to see them upset.

Another participant, although initially hurt by the disclosure, later found relief in no longer having to conceal their true identity, stating, "But now, I'm glad that it happened because that's just a lot to hide. That's not fun to hide."

One participant shared that the events led to a reconnection with his father, from whom he had been completely estranged following his parents' divorce. Prior to this, he had no contact with his father for three years. However, after being outed by his mother, he had the opportunity to engage in conversation with his father and meet his stepmother. This encounter paved the way for both his father and stepmother to become crucial pillars of support in his life moving forward. The participant noted that the experience of coming out to his father was significantly more positive than with his mother, expressing, "I think he's pretty free-flowing when it comes to conversation and stuff. He [his father] definitely doesn't agree, but he doesn't judge me for it."

Coming out to the Sibling

All of the participants who chose to come out to their siblings reported the coming out process was "easy and feeling authentic." While all responses were positive, one participant felt somewhat disappointed by her sibling's reaction. Reflecting on the experience, the participant remarked, "I was a little disappointed that she wasn't excited for me or something, but again our relationship at the time was pretty strained. I was a little disappointed but also it definitely wasn't defensive, it wasn't angry."

For participants who were outed by their parents, their reactions varied from feeling better than expected to feeling isolated. One participant described the experience

as akin to "dropping a bomb" on their family but expressed relief when their sisters reacted calmly and without judgment, stating, "They didn't hate me, so I felt really pretty good afterwards."

On the other hand, another participant didn't have the chance to personally disclose her sexual orientation to their siblings, as her parents had already revealed this information. The participant reflected on this, "I didn't really get to do that either. My parents told them at some point." Recalling a conversation with the older brother, who was away at college during that time, the participant noted her attempt to discuss the matter later. However, despite her efforts, the brother advised compliance with their parents' wishes for her own good.

Additionally, the participant mentioned, "With my younger brother and sister, I know at some point they were informed, but we didn't really discuss it." The participant further explained that their younger sister was only 10 years old at the time of disclosure, making it challenging to engage in conversations about the topic. However, the younger sister has become incredibly supportive over the years, being the only family member who has met the participant's current partner.

Phase 3: Distancing

Following the disclosure, all participants described a period during which they distanced themselves physically and emotionally from their family members. Furthermore, they all articulated a sense of being the black sheep within their family dynamics. The research referred to this phase as "distancing." The length of distancing time depends on when participants perceived or felt that their parents valued their relationship, which took from a couple of weeks to several years.

Because of the physical and sexual abuse they endured before coming out, multiple participants voiced their struggle to attain the family support necessary to improve their relationships beyond the coming out process. The act of coming out exacerbated existing issues or triggered underlying tensions rather than being the sole or primary cause of the problem. This situation led to the establishment of unspoken family rules, such as the prohibition of expressing emotions. One participant reflected, "I think the reason our relationship is better now is because there's not all this chaos going on…But, I still wouldn't say it's great..." Throughout the interview, this participant repeatedly mentioned that their relationship with their mother involved "sweeping stuff under the rug."

Four of the participants came out or were outed during their transition from high school to college, while one participant came out to their family during the first semester of their sophomore year in college. Consequently, all participants either left home to attend college or were already enrolled when they came out to their families. As all participants were transitioning into adulthood, this naturally distanced them and their families. This physical separation contributed to a reduction in conflict and tempered the situation's intensity. While all participants reported feeling better than they did at the time of coming out to their families, they still did not feel particularly close or secure within their family relationships. One participant reflected, "I think it [going to college] also just makes me a lot more self-aware in my relationships in general. I mean, that's why I can identify the dynamic with my mom, instead of just feeling tension for no reason. There are reasons, they're just repressed and swept under the rug."

Phase 4: Reconnecting

The final phase entails eventual reconnection. Depending on the time they have been out to their families, all participants expressed their ability to reconnect with at least one family member. This process took anywhere from a few weeks to a few years. Reconnecting began when parents recognized the importance of their relationship with their child and the complexity of their child's identity, while simultaneously the participant began valuing their own autonomy and adulthood. Sometimes parents came to value their relationship with the participants due to falling out with other family members. Either way, changes in parent and participant perspectives led to open and honest conversations and eventually to reconnection.

Re-Evaluating

Initially, certain families came to understand that their loved one's LGBTQ identity did not solely define their personality. Instead, they began to recognize other facets of their identity and placed greater importance on maintaining a positive relationship rather than solely focusing on their LGBTQ identity. As a result, family members reached out and became more accepting of the participants, even if they did not hold the same values. One participant articulated this sentiment:

> But as time has gone on, I think my parents have kind of realized that 'why are we arguing when like this, that's my daughter, like that's a relationship that I want to have.' I think they have realized that, so we have a lot more fun when I go home, and I get excited to go home.

Another participant shared her experience of her father's efforts to learn and understand LGBTQ issues despite their differing values. She explained, "He's listened to

podcasts. He's listened to pastors. He still doesn't agree with me, but he's educated himself. And so that's helped to mend our relationship. Because he understands more now." Reflecting on the impact of her father's willingness to educate himself, she added,

> I think it's meant a lot. I've grown the most out of him and my mom. He has grown the most, and it means a lot to me that he's taken the time to educate himself and not just stick to one traditional thing.

Another participant also reported a similar experience:

> I feel good about that. To me, it means a lot that he asked because he doesn't really ask a lot of questions. So, the fact that he was curious enough to wonder and then wanted to know enough to be willing to ask me, knowing it would be uncomfortable for them. It honestly meant a lot.

> The participant concluded by highlighting the importance of acknowledging the complexity of their identity beyond their LGBTQ status, "We had a conversation once where he said, 'You know, what I realized the other day is, you being gay, that's not your entire personality.'"

> Some participants and their families experienced this re-evaluating process through some challenge they had to face. For instance, one participant faced severe mental health challenges and had to move back in with her family. Initially, she had been completely estranged from her family for over two years. Reflecting on this experience, the participant shared,

> They're very supportive and very helpful. And I think that that helped kind of bridge the gap because my parents saw, okay, this is a way that we can help our

child. So they were able to see past me coming out and focus on the mental health

stuff.

This shared struggle with mental health issues gave the parents an opportunity to view

their child differently, and brought the family together, fostering a sense of unity and

support.

Another participant also faced being cut off by their family. However, she later

discovered it was at the suggestion of her aunt and uncle, who were previously very close

to her family. This decision completely cut her off from her cousin, her closest friend at

the time. When her parents and other family members witnessed the harm caused by this

separation, they realized it was not the type of relationship they wanted with their

daughter. Consequently, they came to the realization that the participants were not the

aunt and uncle's children. They really cared about their relationship and brought them

back together.

The participant shared:

And my parents started seeing like, oh, you don't know what you're doing or

talking about. And the things you're saying are hateful. Even though we're

religious and we believe God condemns gay people, we don't think the Bible tells

us to do what you guys are doing. I noticed a big change in me and my parents'

relationship.

The participant reflected that this change in dynamics also affected her parents'

relationship with the aunts and uncle, causing a rift between them. This incident

prompted a family dynamic shift, leading to strained relationships between the

participant's parents and her aunt and uncle. The participant highlighted how this

experience brought her closer to her parents. Witnessing her pain, they became protective and supportive, strengthening their bond.

Developing Autonomy

Secondly, participants and their families acknowledged a shift in roles within the family dynamic; participants were no longer minors but adults, deserving autonomy and authority in decision-making within the family. One participant remarked,

> But it was nice because it reminded her that I don't have to talk to her. Like, she's not entitled to me. I think that once kids reach adulthood, the way they treat their parents is directly reflective of the way their parents treated them growing up.
>
> And it shifts the entire situation.

Another participant noted, "I would say with my parents, the dynamic shifted where, especially now, sometimes I feel like I'm the adult and they're the children. I feel like I'm always the bigger person."

The researcher found that when the participants or their families realized the role shift, they started to react to conflict or emotion differently. For instance, the participant shared her experience of being completely cut off by her family, both financially and socially. However, she chose to take the mature approach, stating, "They completely cut me off financially, almost like socially, like they didn't want to talk to me and, but I was the bigger person."

As time passed, she began to reflect on her situation and realized she had more control over her life than initially thought. Despite feeling like she was reverting to her teenage years, she recognized the differences in her circumstances and her newfound autonomy. She expressed, "I think having that perspective made me want to start

realizing things could be different if I wanted them to. And if I wanted to have a relationship with my parents in spite of our differences, that's possible."

Furthermore, observing other individuals who successfully navigated relationships with their religious parents while being gay inspired her to take action as an adult. With this newfound perspective and autonomy, she felt empowered to work towards improving her relationship with her parents, recognizing the importance of honesty and open communication. She concluded, "I don't think, as a teenager, I had the autonomy to make that decision, but have that distance from them to where I can choose to make things work with them and be honest with them and tell them how I feel." And that is the turning point of her relationship with her family.

Simultaneously, the researcher observed that as family members began to recognize the participant's transition from a minor to an adult, they also reassessed the participant's role within the family. One participant shared an example of this shift, explaining, "I think they finally saw that I wasn't causing a fuss, I was responding to a fuss, and it changed the way I think my family saw my brother instead of me being the squeaky wheel, these incidents all shifted that for me, and I'm no longer the black sheep, which is fantastic."

Being Honest

The research emphasized honesty as fundamental for successful reconnection, and a notion echoed in all interviews. Open and candid conversations with family members were pivotal in fostering reconciliation, regardless of differing values within the family unit. Indeed, none of the participants and their family members shared the same values. However, through truthful dialogue, they overcame relationship barriers, acknowledged

changes in roles, and rallied together to confront shared struggles. This cultivated a deeper bond and a mutual understanding of the importance of nurturing healthy relationships grounded in honesty and empathy. Ultimately, the central element facilitating successful reconnection, emphasized in all interviews, was honesty. Engaging in open and candid conversations with family members facilitated reconciliation, irrespective of agreement or disagreement on specific family values.

All participants reported feeling closer after engaging in honest conversations, whereas they experienced distance when unable to be truthful with each other. One participant emphasized the significance of honesty, stating,

Just from the beginning, it was this very much, like, honest perspective, like, [my stepmom seemed to say] 'I'm not perfect, I'm gonna mess up, but I still love you, and I'll admit when I'm wrong.' Yeah. And I think that was really important to me. So that's kind of what I mean by real.

However, other participants recounted struggling and feeling distant from their families due to their inability to be honest. One participant expressed a desire for honesty within the family dynamic, stating, "Part of me wanted to be honest because I feel like it's hard to be honest within my family dynamic. So it's something that I really crave." This sentiment was echoed by other participants as well. The researcher observed that honesty played a significant role in the structural changes within families. Participants who were able to maintain honesty reported greater levels of reconnection compared to those who were unable to do so.

In conclusion, the research underscores the vital role of honesty in facilitating successful reconnection within families, as evidenced by the experiences shared by

participants. Open and candid conversations emerged as the cornerstone of reconciliation despite differing values and past struggles. Through these truthful dialogues, participants and their families were able to surmount relationship barriers, recognize evolving roles, and unite in facing common challenges. This process fostered a deeper bond and underscored the importance of nurturing healthy relationships grounded in honesty and empathy. While some participants highlighted the transformative power of honesty in strengthening familial ties, others lamented the distance and struggle caused by an inability to be truthful within their family dynamics. Nevertheless, the overarching theme remains clear: honesty serves as a linchpin for fostering understanding, connection, and ultimately, familial harmony. As such, the findings underscore the significance of prioritizing honest communication in navigating familial relationships.

Summary of Structural Changes

The researcher approached the analysis of the interviews through a structural lens, revealing distinct phases characterized by rigid boundaries between parents and children during the hiding phase. Within this structure, parents assumed authoritative roles, and information flow between subsystems was constrained, with rules prohibiting open discussions about problems, traumas, and fears. However, the act of coming out disrupted this homeostasis, challenging established norms and religious doctrines, and rebelling against existing power structures. This disruption often led to extreme distance and severed connections between subsystems.

In the process of reconnecting, participants described efforts to establish a new homeostasis characterized by a redistribution of autonomy to adult children and a shift in rules to allow for more open communication between subsystems. This transition

signaled a departure from the previous restrictive environment, where emotions and identities were suppressed, towards a more inclusive and supportive familial dynamic. By renegotiating boundaries and fostering open dialogue, participants sought to create a healthier and more harmonious family structure that accommodated their authentic selves and facilitated genuine connections.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The process of coming out for LGBTQ individuals within Christian families is intricate and pivotal, profoundly impacting both the individual and their familial relationships. A crucial determinant in this process is the response of family members, which can yield both positive and negative outcomes for LGBTQ individuals. Research suggests that religion, particularly Christianity, significantly influences the mental health outcomes of LGBTQ individuals, adding complexity to their coming-out experiences (Sandler, 2022). While prior studies have explored the effects of coming out within Christian families, this research delves deeper, examining both the process and aftermath, focusing on changes in family dynamics and structures.

Employing a structural family model and grounded theory methodology, this study provides a comprehensive exploration of the coming-out journey experienced by LGBTQ individuals within Christian families. It scrutinizes shifts in family structures before and after the disclosure event. The findings unveil a clear pattern in the participants' narratives, delineated by four distinct phases: Hiding, Coming out, Distancing, and Reconnecting.

Before coming out, all participants not only concealed their sexual orientation/identity but also their feelings and concerns from their family members. This concealment often resulted in mental health issues, conflicts within relationships, and feelings of isolation during the "Hiding" phase. Participants hesitated to come out to their

families because they felt adequately supported by their parents. The existing literature points out family members might withhold financial support, such as college tuition or living expenses, as a form of punishment or control, reflecting the rejection of LGBTQ individuals (Pistella et al., 2020). This situation appears in our observation with two participants who concealed their orientation/identity due to concerns that their family members might withhold financial support.

In the "Coming Out" phase, the majority of participants were outed due to a lack of trust and support from their family members. This observation also aligns with existing literature, which suggests that participants often come out to their friends first, and they would come out to their siblings before revealing their sexual orientation or identity to their parents (Sandler, 2022). However, participants typically only confide in their siblings first if they perceive them as a safe and supportive person. In this case, the observation differs from the literature's assertion that individuals come out to siblings to gauge their family members' reactions (Jenkins, 2008). Instead, participants reported coming out to their siblings to establish a supportive union, forming a subsystem where siblings could assist with damage control when eventually disclosing their identity to their parents.

Participants who voluntarily came out did so driven by a desire to embrace their authentic selves without concealment. However, regardless of the initiation of the coming-out process, whether voluntary or involuntary, all participants reported experiencing feelings of rejection and estrangement from their parents, irrespective of the level of parental support, consistent with findings from Hilton (2011) and others. This aligns with research by Reed and colleagues (2020). While some individuals perceived

their coming out as successful because it surpassed their expectations, the majority found the experience challenging and uncomfortable. Furthermore, some participants reported entirely negative outcomes. Those who found the experience difficult and uncomfortable often reported a mixture of positive and negative experiences.

After the disclosure, a phase of both physical and emotional distancing from family members emerged, marked by a sense of becoming an outlier within the family dynamic—a phase termed as "Distancing" in this study. The duration of this distancing phase varied, depending on how participants perceived their parents' valuation of their relationship, ranging from a few weeks to several years. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that the parent-child relationship often undergoes strain post-disclosure (Drumm et al., 2021; Reed et al., 2020).

The concluding stage, termed "Reconnecting," showed differing lengths but marked a crucial transition as parents acknowledged the intricacy of their child's identity and the importance of their bond. This recognition, alongside shifts in perspectives, enabled open and honest communication, leading to a re-establishment of connection. This finding resonates with the research by Reed and colleagues (2020), indicating that numerous parents, regardless of their religious convictions, can ultimately achieve resolution and harmony with their LGBTQ child.

Through a structural lens, the study identifies rigid boundaries between parents and children during the hiding phase, where parents assumed authoritative roles, inhibiting open discussions. Coming out disrupted this dynamic, challenging established norms and power structures, often resulting in increased distance between family members. However, in the Reconnecting, participants sought to establish a new

equilibrium, redistributing autonomy to adult children and promoting open communication.

One participant reported that after she returned home for support to cope with her mental health issues after being cut off by the family for three years, she found her relationship with her parents had shifted significantly. She explained, "Before, they had this kind of authority over me that was fine as a kid because they're your parents. But then, once you reach adulthood, it's frustrating because they don't really have that kind of power over you anymore." This highlights a fundamental change in the power dynamics within the household, with the participant asserting her autonomy and challenging parental authority. This transition marked a departure from past suppression towards a more inclusive and supportive familial environment, emphasizing the importance of renegotiating boundaries and fostering genuine connections.

In considering the impact of Christianity on this coming-out process, it is essential to acknowledge that while religion undoubtedly plays a significant role in shaping familial dynamics and individual beliefs, the fundamental stages of the process may not differ substantially between Christian and non-Christian families. The four stages identified in this study—Hiding, Coming Out, Distancing, and Reconnecting—align with existing literature on the coming-out experiences of LGBTQ individuals, regardless of religious background (Sandler, 2022). Therefore, the influence of Christianity may not manifest prominently in the overall process itself. However, it is plausible to suggest that the Christian factor could have a more profound impact on an individual's self-discovery journey. For instance, participants in this study reported experiencing a denial phase before coming to terms with their sexual orientation or identity. One participant reflected

on the level of denial and obliviousness, indicating a significant internal struggle that may

be influenced by religious beliefs and societal norms within Christian communities.

Therefore, while the process model may remain consistent, the Christian factor may exert

a more substantial influence on the internal journey of self-acceptance and identity

exploration for LGBTQ individuals within Christian families.

Clinical Implications

The findings of this research have important clinical implications for therapists

working with LGBTQ individuals and their families. By understanding the stages of the

coming-out process identified in this study, clinicians can better support their clients by

recognizing where they are in their journey and addressing their specific needs

accordingly. For example, clients in the "Hiding" phase may benefit from exploring their

feelings of fear and shame surrounding their identity in a safe and supportive therapeutic

environment.

Additionally, therapists can leverage the findings of this research to foster

transparent and sincere communication between LGBTQ individuals and their family

members. By tackling the underlying issues that lead to familial discord during the

coming-out process, therapists can guide clients and their families through challenging

discussions, fostering reconciliation. This may entail educating family members about

LGBTQ identities and dispelling any misconceptions or biases they may harbor.

Furthermore, therapists can assist in renegotiating boundaries and roles during the

reconnection phase, steering the family towards establishing balanced boundaries and

embracing flexible roles, ultimately promoting autonomy.

Moreover, therapists can integrate the themes and ideas identified in this research into their therapeutic interventions to provide more comprehensive support to their clients. For example, exploring the concept of "Distancing" and its impact on familial relationships can help clients understand their experiences and develop strategies for reconnecting with their loved ones. By equipping therapists with these valuable tools and insights, this research contributes to the development of more effective and culturally sensitive interventions for LGBTQ individuals and their families.

The implications of this research reach beyond clinical settings to encompass family dynamics, educational institutions, and religious communities. Understanding the stages of the coming-out process outlined in this study can facilitate empathy and support for LGBTQ individuals within families. By recognizing the challenges faced during each phase—from hiding to reconnecting—family members can cultivate an environment of acceptance and understanding. Therapists can play a crucial role in facilitating these discussions by providing psychoeducation to family members about LGBTQ identities and fostering open communication channels.

In educational institutions, such as universities, there is a growing need for increased awareness and support for LGBTQ students navigating the coming-out process. Incorporating university LGBTQ support groups can significantly benefit LGBTQ students by providing a vital community for connection and support, reducing feelings of isolation, and inspiring hope through shared experiences. These groups offer a safe space for students to explore their identities, seek guidance, and advocate for LGBTQ rights on campus. By fostering personal growth, resilience, and a sense of belonging, LGBTQ

support groups empower students to navigate their journey with confidence and thrive academically and personally within a more inclusive university environment.

Similarly, churches and religious organizations can benefit from engaging in dialogue and education surrounding LGBTQ inclusion and acceptance. By fostering an environment of love, compassion, and understanding, churches can become affirming spaces for LGBTQ individuals and their families. Religious leaders can play a pivotal role in challenging harmful stereotypes and advocating for LGBTQ rights within their congregations. Furthermore, churches can offer support groups and pastoral counseling services to address the spiritual and emotional needs of LGBTQ individuals and their families.

Overall, the implications of this research highlight the importance of fostering supportive environments across various societal contexts. By promoting education, dialogue, and acceptance, therapists, educational institutions, and religious communities can contribute to the well-being and empowerment of LGBTQ individuals and their families.

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge certain limitations in this study. While the primary focus is on understanding the experiences within Christian families when LGBTQ individuals come out, it is essential to note that the resources available for this research may not allow for a comprehensive examination of the entire family unit. Therefore, the study relied on individual interviews to gather data and insights. By focusing on individual perspectives, there is a possibility of overlooking the broader family dynamics and interactions that may occur during the coming out process. Family dynamics are

complex and involve multiple members, each contributing to the overall experience. By solely interviewing individuals, the study may not capture the full range of family dynamics and how they evolve in response to the disclosure event.

Additionally, the sample size and selection process may also pose limitations. The study's findings may not be generalizable to all Christian families or LGBTQ individuals, as the sample size might be restricted due to resource constraints or specific recruitment methods. The findings may reflect the experiences and perspectives of a specific subset of participants.

Despite these limitations, this study aims to provide valuable insights into the process of coming out for LGBTQ individuals within Christian families. By focusing on individual experiences, the research can shed light on personal journeys and highlight important factors that influence support and understanding.

Future Research Direction

Moving forward, future research should aim to address the limitations identified in this study to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the coming-out process within Christian families. One potential direction is to incorporate a mixed-methods approach that combines individual and family interviews with observations or family-based assessments. By observing family interactions and dynamics firsthand, researchers can gain deeper insights into how the coming-out process impacts the entire family unit.

Furthermore, expanding the sample size and employing more diverse recruitment methods could enhance the generalizability of the findings. This could involve reaching out to a broader range of Christian families and LGBTQ individuals, including those from different cultural backgrounds or religious denominations. By diversifying the

sample, researchers can capture a more representative spectrum of experiences and perspectives.

Additionally, longitudinal studies could be conducted to explore how family dynamics evolve over time following the disclosure event. By tracking families' experiences and interactions longitudinally, researchers can examine long-term outcomes and identify factors that contribute to positive adaptation and resilience within Christian families.

Overall, future research should aim to overcome the limitations of this study by adopting more comprehensive methodologies, diversifying the sample, and exploring the longitudinal impacts of the coming-out process on Christian families and LGBTQ individuals. Through these efforts, researchers can contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in navigating sexual orientation disclosure within religious contexts.

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APPENDIX A

Institutional Review Board Approval

The Institutional Review Board at Abilene Christian University states that Ying Zou's project titled "Structural Changes after Coming Out in a Christian Family," which is IRB #2023-71, is exempt, Category 2.(ii) under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects. This approval is dated November 3, 2023. Please contact the ACU Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at orsp@acu.edu with any questions.

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

1) What was your relationship with each of your family members before you came out?

- How close were you with your parents and siblings? How much conflict was there?

- Does your family have boundaries? What do those boundaries look like?

- Are there any rules in your family?

- What was your role in the family before you came out?

- What is the role of each family member?

- How did your family communicate with each other before?

2) When did you come out to each of the family members?

- What made you decide to come out? Why then?

- What was your family member's response during the disclosure?

- Do you think your role in the family impacts the disclosure event?

- Did the disclosure event change the relationship/role of you and the family member? What changed?

3) What is your relationship with each of your family members now?

- Is your relationship closer or more distant?

- Did your role in the family change? Did other family members' role change?

- Are the rules and boundaries changed?

- How do your family communicate with each other now?