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Research

"Coming Out" to Parents in a Christian Context: A Consensual Qualitative Analysis of LGB Student Experiences

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Disclosures of same-sex attraction are some of the most difficult experiences for lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals. For LGB individuals of faith, disclosure to parents is often complicated by the intersection of religion/spirituality and sexuality. This study presents a grounded theory about a particular subgroup to address gaps in the literature concerning how LGB students on Christian college campuses describe and experience their parental disclosures. Consensual qualitative research analysis (Hill, Knox, Thompson, Williams, & Hess, 2005; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997) revealed themes related to predisclosure influencing factors, the disclosure event experience, and longer term impacts of the disclosure. Implications for parents, counselors, and college faculty/staff are provided.

Keywords: same-sex sexual identity, religion/spirituality, same-sex disclosures, parent-child relations, family relations

The increased attention given to same-sex issues over the past decades has produced extensive research into the challenges that individuals in the lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) community face navigating identity development in the context of their families (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008;

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Rothman, Sullivan, Keyes, & Boehmer, 2012). The decision to come out, or to disclose one's sexual identity or orientation, to parents and family members has emerged as an important milestone in the identity formation process (Baiocco et al., 2015; Ryan, 2001; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). In addition to being an important step, this disclosure can also be a major stressor for the individual's family as they try to reconcile their beliefs and assumptions about sexual orientation with their love for their child and attempt to respond in appropriate ways (Conley, 2011; Maslowe & Yarhouse, 2015).

Although many of the studies on LGB disclosures are conducted on college students (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008), LGB students' experiences on Christian campuses are rarely heard or studied (for exceptions to this observation, see Stratton, Dean, Yarhouse, & Lastoria, 2013; Wolff, Himes, Soares, & Kwon, 2016; Yarhouse, Stratton, Dean, & Brooke, 2009). This is an oversight that is further exacerbated by an overall lack of research into Christian LGB individuals' and parents' experiences surrounding same-sex disclosures (Baiocco, Cacioppo, Laghi, & Tafà, 2013; Conley, 2011; Parrott, Adams, & Zeichner, 2002; Savin-Williams, 2001).

Same-Sex Disclosures

The process of deciding to disclose one's sexual identity has been described as one of the most difficult challenges as well as one of the most important milestones that LGB individuals face in their identity development (D'amico, Julien, Tremblay, & Chartrand, 2015; Savin-Williams, 2003; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). Unfortunately, LGB children often expect their parents to react negatively (Savin-Williams, 2003), and parents have often confirmed this expectation in initial disclosure conversations (Conley, 2011; Willoughby, Doty, & Malik, 2008). Although there is a paucity of studies that look at the long-term outcomes of disclosures, the existing research suggests LGB children tend to be less likely than their parents to perceive an overall improvement in their parent-child relationships after disclosure (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Savin-Williams & Dubé, 1998). This might suggest that the LGB child is more adversely affected than the parents in terms of the parent-child relationship. Furthermore, negative family reactions to coming out and rejection of a child's sexuality have been linked to negative mental health and behavioral outcomes (Rothman et al., 2012; Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010; Willoughby, Doty, & Malik, 2010).

Researchers have also reported that disclosing can have a positive effect on parent-child relationships, helping LGB individuals feel more authentic in their relationships (Svab & Kuhar, 2014; Vaughan & Waehler, 2010). For example, Shilo and Savaya (2011) demonstrated that perceived support from parents and family was the strongest predictor of self-acceptance and decreased the likelihood of the child experiencing mental distress. Similarly, disclosures have been associated with reduced anxiety (Lewis, Derlega, Berndt, Morris, & Rose, 2001), improved mental health, stronger self-identity, and

more positive relationships and social support (Vaughan & Waehler, 2010). The positive and negative outcomes associated with parental disclosures in the literature indicate a need for further consideration of this area for counselors helping students navigate this complex relational interaction.

Disclosures and Faith

Although few researchers have investigated the intersectionality of religion and same-sex disclosures, religiosity has been noted primarily for its negative effect on how a family responds initially and the longer term impact of the disclosure (Baiocco et al., 2015; Baiocco, Nardelli, Pezzuti, & Lingiardi, 2013; Parrott et al., 2002). Although religious belief has been found to correlate with negative outcomes of disclosure (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Padilla-Walker & Thompson, 2005), it is rarely a strong predictor, and it is usually measured using simple scales of self-reported religiosity. Research methods, therefore, may be imprecise in their measurements of complexities of religious belief and fail to present a detailed consideration of the role of faith in disclosures and decisions to disclose.

Despite the insufficient attention devoted to the role of Christian faith in LGB Christian college students, there are notable studies that introduce research on disclosures to parents. Maslowe and Yarhouse (2015) interviewed Christian parents of LGB children about their responses to their child's disclosure, providing a unique look at the struggles Christian parents can face when working to reconcile their faith with their desire to love and care for their child. The authors found that parents' initial reactions to the disclosure included feelings of anger, guilt, grief, isolation, denial, and a strained relationship with their child. In addition to these findings, the authors noted that many parents were eventually able to achieve resolution, peace, and enrichment in their relationship with their LGB child, often through support from others, information seeking, and self-care.

Furthermore, Rosenkrantz, Rostosky, Riggle, and Cook (2016) found that religious LGB individuals reported that, among other benefits, their faith helped them feel loved and accepted for their sexual identity and experience positive familial relationships because of their shared faith, and it provided strength for disclosing and coping with negative attitudes toward their sexual identity. Although disclosure to parents was not a major focus of this investigation, faith may play a role in family relational outcomes. More studies need to focus on the influence of faith in the disclosure event.

Thus, because disclosures can be among the most difficult experiences for LGB individuals and are a common occurrence during the college-age years (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003), in the present study we sought to provide a "rich and thick description" (Creswell, 2014, p. 202) of LGB students on Christian college campuses who "come out" to their parents. Moreover, this study creates the opportunity to hear the actual voices of those Christian sexual minorities who are living out this experience with their parents and

serves as the bookend for Maslowe and Yarhouse's (2015) look at the experience of parents when their children "come out."

Method

Participants

Survey. After receiving support from the Association for Christians in Student Development, student development officers affiliated with the Association for Christians in Student Development were approached about functioning as gatekeepers for a study on the experience of sexual minorities at Christian colleges and universities. For the purposes of this study, "sexual minorities" were those "individuals with same-sex attractions or behavior, regardless of self-identification" (Diamond, 2008, p. 142). Fifteen schools (representing 10 states) elected to participate. There was broad geographic representation with two participating schools in the Northeast, six in the Midwest, two in the South, three in the Central region, and two in the West. Likewise, participants lived broadly across the United States, with 30 from the East (18.8%), 43 from the Midwest (26.9%), 36 from the Central region (22.5%), 32 from the South (20.0%), and 16 from the West (10.0%), with one from outside the United States and two unknown.

Schools first announced the study to their students in their chapel services via a brief verbal announcement and/or a short video presentation. Following this announcement, invitations to participate, along with confirmation that the research had been approved by their institution and a link to the online survey, were emailed to all students. Participation in the study required online interaction with a survey. Most relevant to this article, all participants were also invited to take part as volunteers in a 45-minute interview. The final sample of 160 participants completed the entire survey.

Interviews. Out of the final survey sample of 160, 39 students (24%) agreed to participate in interviews with trained master's- and doctoral-level research assistants about campus climate, milestone events, current relational status, and religion/spirituality. As an aspect of milestone events, students were asked to describe their first disclosure and also other "meaningful" disclosures of their same-sex attraction. In the current study we investigated the experiences of 25 students from the larger sample of 39 volunteer interviewees who cited their parents in their description of either first or important subsequent disclosures. They responded to the following interview queries: (a) Tell me about when you first disclosed your same-sex attraction or identity, and (b) Tell about subsequent disclosures that were meaningful to you (i.e., parents, siblings, friends, pastors, teachers, etc.). There was no follow-up to discover reasons for nondisclosure to parents for the 14 interviewees who disclosed to other friends or family.

The gender distribution of this subgroup of 25 included 40% female respondents (n = 10) and 60% male respondents (n = 15). Their average reported age was 21.4 years (SD = 4.58). Respondents tended to identify as single,

never-married (92%); only one was married to an opposite-sex partner, and one listed "other." Among the four school classifications, seniors were overrepresented, making up almost half of the interview sample (freshmen, 4%; sophomores, 16%; juniors, 20%; seniors, 48%; fifth-year seniors, 4%; and graduate students, 8%). Religious affiliation was largely Protestant/non-Catholic Christian (84%, $n = 21$), with a smaller number of affiliations being Orthodox Christian (4%, $n = 1$) and other non-Catholic affiliations (12%, $n = 3$). The ethnic/racial makeup of the sample was largely Caucasian/White (96%, $n = 24$) with one African American participant (4%).

Sexual orientation in this interview sample was described as homosexual (52%, $n = 13$), bisexual (28%, $n = 7$), heterosexual (4%, $n = 1$), no label (8%, $n = 2$), and other (8%, $n = 2$). Sexual identity of the sample was reported as lesbian/gay (56%, $n = 14$), bisexual (28%, $n = 7$), straight (8%, $n = 2$), queer (4%, $n = 1$), and questioning (4%, $n = 1$). When students in this sample were asked about their "level" of same-sex attraction (SSA) and opposite-sex attraction (OSA) on a 10-point scale with 1 indicating low levels of SSA and OSA and 10 indicating high levels of SSA and OSA, these students noted high levels of SSA (80% equal to or greater than 8) and low levels of OSA (76% equal to or less than 4).

Data Analysis

Because of the relative underrepresentation of studies about the population of interest, we used a descriptive research methodology. Methods that are descriptive or qualitative in nature are deemed appropriate for analyzing relatively new and unexplored research questions, especially in the study of social relations (Flick, 2014). This naturalistic approach allows freedom for participants to share multiple aspects of their experiences about their parental disclosures without having to fit a set of a priori assumptions based on previous research. Indeed, research about Christian college and university students coming out to parents is scarce, making a grounded theory for this unique sample an important addition to the literature. A qualitatively produced "grounded theory" refers to descriptive conclusions that are discovered through an inductive process. Patterns emerge in the interview content analysis, building from "particulars" to general themes, as opposed to a more deductive process in which previously researched categories or hypotheses are confirmed or disconfirmed (Creswell, 2014). All open-ended interview questions and procedures were approved by the internal review boards of the researchers' institutions and the participating faith-based institutions.

Consensual qualitative research (CQR; Hill, Knox, Thompson, Williams, & Hess, 2005; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997) was the methodology used to analyze the interview content and build consensus systematically about themes grounded in the data. The data analysis team consisted of three master's- and one doctoral-level student and two PhD faculty members, who served as independent coders and auditors, respectively. Graduate

students received CQR training from one faculty member before coding commenced. Training consisted of readings in the professional literature and prior experiential sessions with other interview data. Auditors served as reviewers and supervisors of coding and thematic development. One auditor functioned during the consensus-building process as an observer, questioner, and evaluator of the qualitative work. The other auditor provided feedback on the conclusions and written narrative. Auditors improved the chance that reflexivity, as well as group errors, might be explicitly addressed and considered in the interpretive process (Flick, 2014).

Following the CQR procedures to produce a valid grounded theory (Hill et al., 1997), all 25 verbatim transcriptions were divided into domains related to the two abovementioned interview questions. Each independent coder was assigned a certain number of interviews and given responsibility for creating an abstract of the content, in which the coder tried "to capture the essence of what the [student] has said about the domain in fewer words and with more clarity" (Hill et al., 1997, p. 546). Coders at this point in the analysis made no inferences about the meaning of the interview data, remaining as close as possible to the explicit perspective of the interviewee. The goal was to "skinny down" the content for a more efficient and systematized approach to the data analysis. The interviews were assigned so that the content was always viewed by two coders, who worked independently to craft an abstract. Once abstracts were completed, the two coders were brought together with the whole team to work toward consensus on the abstracts. Discrepancies were discussed and reviewed by the team of coders. One auditor oversaw the consensus-building process and had the opportunity to confer with the coders.

Once the consensual abstracts were completed, the team performed an analysis across interview areas to discover thematic similarities and dissimilarities. Coders worked independently on thematic identification and analysis before joining a fellow coder who assessed the same abstracted items. The cross-checking and consensus-building process was used again by the whole group of coders and auditor. There was significant consistency in the frequency of identified themes by the coders. The triangulated themes were evaluated as either general, applying to all or nearly all (90%) of the cases; typical, applying to between half and less than 90% of the cases; or variant, applying to less than half of the cases. Final themes were ultimately discussed in the group and reviewed by the auditors for evidence of data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). These procedures of cross-checking and triangulation—especially with an external auditor—have been a hallmark of verifying dependability and trustworthiness of results gained through qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

It is important to note that the classic goal of qualitative research is not to produce generalizable results, but instead to provide rich descriptions for this time- and context-bound sample of students who experience same-sex attraction while attending a Christian institution of higher education. Transferability of the results to other settings rests on similarity of this sample

to other Christian college and university students (Creswell, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

The themes that arose from the CQR data analysis were found to fit into three temporal areas: predisclosure influencing factors, the actual disclosure event, and the postdisclosure impact. These broad themes distinguished between existing or precursory factors that affected the disclosure event, parental reactions to the disclosure from the child's perspective, and the subsequent outcomes of the disclosure event.

Influencing Factors

This theme includes information about predisclosure factors that were present in the lives of the parents, the child, or their relationship. Four factors in the interviews appeared to influence the disclosure event: (a) parental opposition to same-sex attraction and/or behaviors, (b) prior positive parent-child relationship, (c) closer connection to one parent over the other, and (d) parental experiences with other same-sex-attracted individuals prior to the disclosure event.

Of the 25 students, 10 students, or 40%, mentioned that their parents were opposed to same-sex attractions and/or behaviors prior to their disclosure event. This theme was the most prominent influencing factor and was based on religious beliefs and/or sociocultural opposition to homosexuality. In describing this influencing factor, a gay male student noted, "I think feeling attraction to the same gender made me feel like I was wrong in some way—I come from a very conservative city, very conservative church, very conservative family. So the only thing I had heard about same-sex attraction is that it's bad, no don't do it, no it's not okay."

Seven of the students, 28%, intentionally noted that their relationship prior to the disclosure event was positive with one or both parents. Positive affect associated with the parent(s) seemed to lay the groundwork for these students to divulge their same-sex attraction rather than keeping it secret. A questioning female student explained, "Me and mom always had a good relationship, but that was like the one thing I couldn't tell her. So after [the disclosure] it was like there was nothing that I can't talk to my mom about." It is noteworthy that 18 students did not mention a positive relationship prior to the disclosure to parents. Although this finding does not imply that all 18 had a negative or even an ambivalent relationship with parents, it does seem to speak to the significance of parental disclosures for this sample. Even when the relationship with parents was not identified as explicitly positive, most students in this interview sample took the risk of coming out to parents.

Four of the students, 16%, explained that they were closer to their mothers than to their fathers. Although fathers were mentioned by two of these

students, the connection to the mother for these four students was noted as being more influential when it came to considerations about disclosing. For instance, a gay sophomore student said, "I would consider my mom the closest human being to me possible. If my mom were to be gone, that would be so life-shattering. She sat, listened, and asked questions [during the disclosure]." The same student described his relationship with his father in the following way: "I think he's more hesitant in talking about it because he doesn't want to offend me or break the good relationship that we have." These four students all seemed to perceive communications with their mothers as the least difficult path, even when the relationship with the father was not described in negative terms. For these four students, their relationship with their mother appeared to provide a more secure, or at least more predictable, way to contemplate the encounter. For the majority of interviewees who did not mention feeling closer to one parent, it was not clear whether their parent-child relationship was an advantage or a disadvantage. Although it seemed logical that better relationships would make predisclosure planning less complicated, the disclosure task for this sample appeared to remain a complicated unknown. As Heatherington and Lavner (2008) suggested, the complexity of gender and family roles is relevant in planning for disclosure, making it important to consider each family member individually, even though there is clearly a systemic effect.

Two of the students, 8%, said they thought their parents were more willing to listen to their disclosure because they had prior experiences or friendships with same-sex-attracted individuals. For these two students, previous encounters in their parents' lives primed parents to attend to the disclosure in a more open way.

The Disclosure Event

This analysis section collects themes that emerged from students' descriptions of their initial disclosure to their parents of their same-sex attraction. Of the 25 disclosures, only one student described the parental disclosure as initiated by someone other than the interviewee. All of the others were initiated by the interviewee. Also, 10, or 40%, of the disclosures were coded as "parents told separately," and nine of these 10, composed of five men and four women, specifically mentioned telling their mother before their father.

In discussing the disclosure event, seven students (28%) used strongly negative terms without noting anything positive in their depictions or stating anything favorable about the disclosure. A bisexual female student described her mother's reaction as one of "disappointment and disgust" that "solidified the sense of shame that has been a really big part of my family." Another bisexual female said her parents "were not okay with it at first . . . they thought there was some sort of psychological aspect, and my dad wanted me on medication . . . they were just confused."

In contrast, six (24%) of the students described their disclosure event in strongly positive terms, without noting anything negative in their depictions or stating anything unfavorable about the disclosure. A gay male student said, "I wasn't quite sure how she would respond, but I was pleasantly surprised to find that my mom was very loving and very understanding." He quoted her as saying to him, "That's totally fine, I would love you even if you were a sack of potatoes." He further commented, "It was a very good experience." Additionally, a self-identified straight student with same-sex attraction stated, "I told my mom and she at first was like 'wow, I would have never guessed,' then she just said that it is everyone's right to have love and it is no one's right to tell me otherwise. So she was super cool about it. . . . She wanted me to know that I'm still her son and she is going to see me the same way no matter what."

In contrast to those who used exclusively positive or negative descriptions of their disclosure events, 11 students (44 %) described the disclosure event using a mixture of both positive and negative comments. For example, a bisexual male student said, "There were positives and negatives [in the disclosure to mother] . . . it was very much okay . . . but we're not going to deal with it . . . she never brought it up again." Another bisexual male student stated, "I think [my parents] were surprised, but overall it went really well. . . . It was pretty awkward . . . I don't think any Bible verses were cited so that was good."

In terms of the content of these disclosure conversations, students explicitly mentioned parents' use of theology, spirituality, or scripture in four of the interviews (16%). Of these four, only one student described this theme in a positive or affirming way; the other three described it in a negative light. One gay male student reported, "[My mother] wasn't okay with the fact that I was okay with same-sex relationships. So, it unfortunately very quickly devolved into theology."

About half of the undergraduate student interviewees described how their parents tried to dissuade them during the disclosure event—attempting to talk them out of their view. Twenty percent from this group said that their parents believed that the same-sex attraction of their child was a choice and so could be undone. Twelve percent expressed a practical concern about same-sex attraction, such as physical or social danger. The remaining 20% of the students from this group noted how their parents downplayed the significance of the disclosure by stating it was a "phase," that it was something the child would grow out of, or using similar language. Along these lines one female bisexual student quoted her mother as saying, "Oh, everyone experiences that; it's not a big deal."

Twenty percent of the interviewees reported that parents blamed the same-sex experience of the student on external factors—often of a pathological nature. Parenting mistakes, abuse, or chemical imbalances were offered during the disclosure event as the possible causes for or explanations of the same-sex experience. None of these five interviewees experienced this externalization response of parents as a positive outcome.

Finally, six, or 24%, of the students stated that their parents were not surprised by the disclosure. This revelation did not appear to help or hinder students. Of the six students who had this experience with parents, two noted negative outcomes overall, three admitted mixed outcomes, and one was positive.

The Longer Term Disclosure Impact

This analysis section includes information given by the students that specifically described the quality and character of their relationships with their parents after the disclosure event. In situations in which the student may have made several "disclosures" to one or both parents, the first disclosure was determined as the "initial disclosure event," and the longer term impact of the disclosure was then extrapolated from that point forward.

Overall, 10 students (40%) reported that their relationship with their parents had improved postdisclosure. Interviews were counted for this positive shift only if there was also no negative shift reported. This 40% represents purely positive postdisclosure experiences as reported by the students. For example, when one "positive" student was asked about how the disclosure changed his relationship with his parents, he stated, "[It was] absolutely for the better because it began a dialogue between myself and my parents." Half as many interviewees, or 20%, in this sample noted a purely negative shift in their relationship with their parents. A "negative" student described how her mother was "cool about it" during the initial disclosure, but then the mother became more "freaked out" and "opinionated" as they had subsequent conversations. Finally, the mother simply stated, "No, you're not gay . . . you can't be gay." The growing lack of understanding hampered further conversation for this student and her family.

Between those two poles, seven interviewees (28%) noted ambivalence in their relationship with their parents postdisclosure. This ambivalence was characterized by the students describing both positive and negative shifts, or depicting long-term changes in their relationships in more neutral terms. A student coded as "ambivalent" described how his father considered the disclosure to be "eye opening." This could be positive or neutral. In the same interview, it was noted that the father also remained "hesitant in talking about it because he doesn't want to offend me or break the good relationship that we have." This was generally understood in more negative terms. Taken together, these reactions seemed to reveal some level of ambivalence.

Four of the interviewees (16%) also noted that one or both parents denied that the student had same-sex attraction in postdisclosure-event conversations. One lesbian student noted, specifically, "I think my mother is still in denial. She keeps trying to set me up with random guys that I meet." Of these four interviews, two of the interviewees also reported that their relationship with their parents degenerated after the disclosure, and the other two interviewees reported that their relationship with their parents was ambivalent after the

disclosure. None of these interviewees reported strongly positive developments in their relationship postdisclosure.

Another finding in the 25 interviews was that 10 students (40%) noted that the disclosure event brought about more open and honest dialogue over the longer term. For those who found improved postdisclosure communication with parents, a positive disclosure event seemed to be facilitative. Of the 10 interviews with this theme, four of the interviewees were also placed in the positive shift category, while four of the interviewees with this theme were also placed in the mixed category. Only one of the interviewees in the negative shift category noted more open and honest dialogue postdisclosure. The quality of the disclosure event appeared to make a difference in the postdisclosure relationship.

In some cases, after the initial disclosure event, conversation about the interviewee's same-sex attraction was reduced or actively avoided by the parents. Of the 25 interviews, seven (28%) fell in this category. Of the seven interviewees in this category, only one interviewee also reported positive development in their relationships with their parents, two reported ambivalence, and four reported actual degeneration. One gay male student noted, "Anytime I've talked to them it's me calling them. It's not them trying to contact me."

In some cases, the views that the parents had about same-sex attraction and related issues shifted in some way after the disclosure. If the parents' perspective was described as changing even just a small amount, it was coded in this category. Of the 25 interviews, four (16%) were placed in this category. One gay male student noticed a strong shift after his parent's initial perspective at disclosure and remarked, "Now my father has become one of the most outspoken advocates for all kinds of equality." Another gay male student reported on his father's development of a new perspective. He stated simply that his father "finally came to understand that being gay is different than having gay sex."

Discussion

As this research specifically focused on creating a "rich and thick description" (Creswell, 2014, p. 202) from the interviews of 25 Christian students, it seemed noteworthy that 10 of the participants reported their parents' opposition to same-sex behavior as an influencing factor for the disclosure event. Of these 10 participants, all noted that their disclosure conversations were either difficult/awkward or strongly negative. This research methodology does not permit causal statements, but it can be said that parental attitude for this sample coincided with complicated disclosures.

Was parental opposition a faith-based decision alone? The answer to that question is not clear. Although the religious and spiritual background of the parents was not explicitly reported, it seemed reasonable to assume that parents might share the faith-based values of their college-age children.

However, parental opposition to LGB disclosures seemed to be associated with the intersection of sociocultural and religious issues, not just religious beliefs alone. Parents and students appeared to be embedded in cultures with negative views of same-sex attraction, which did include identifiable faith-based communities in some cases, but not exclusively. Thus, the students in this sample appeared to speak of realities in broader culture, not just Christian subculture.

For the seven participants who said they had positive relationships with their parents prior to the disclosure, actual disclosure events showed more variety. Only one participant noted that the actual disclosure event was a positive experience, whereas four said the event was difficult or awkward. Two said the disclosure event was negative. Of this same group of seven interviewees, three noted that their relationship became more positive after the disclosure event, and four said the relationship maintained some level of ambivalence. Thus, the quality of the prior relationship with a parent did not seem to forecast in this sample the perceived outcome of the disclosure. The results suggested that a positive relationship with parents prior to disclosure may remain positive but could also shift toward a more ambivalent and complex situation afterward. Other factors besides the quality of the relationship, including practical issues such as the timing of the disclosure and other family dynamics, likely played a role in these situations. At least, living at the intersection of family, faith, and sexuality appeared to be an ongoing adjustment requiring constant attention and care. On the basis of this sample, these students and their parents would do well to reflect on this ongoing nature of coming out, as opposed to seeing disclosure as a discrete, one-time-only event. It might be said that coming out for this sample is best viewed as a process, particularly focused on event follow-up as well as the event itself.

Notably, of the two participants whose parents had experiences or friendships with LGB individuals, both had positive disclosure events. One of these students did not disclose how the relationship with his parents had been affected since the disclosure, but the other said her relationship with her parents had improved. At least for these students, it appeared that if parents were already in relationships with others who are sexual minorities or had already considered the perspective of LGB persons, they seemed to listen and support their disclosing child in a more satisfactory way. This finding appeared to confirm Ben-Ari (1995), who noted that parents' previous knowledge and experience with LGB persons eased parental adjustment to their child coming out and suggested that education prior to the disclosure event was preferable. Although a small number of students from this sample noted this potential priming effect, it still seemed noteworthy for future research about LGB education and modeled experiences, particularly for those who are associated with a faith community. The complexity of the intersection of faith and sexuality will likely make discussions about Christian family education unique and different from those of other multicultural settings.

Unlike Maslowe and Yarhouse (2015), who found that Christian parents often felt the need to discuss their Christian worldview with their child, we found that in the reports of these students from Christian colleges and universities, theology or scripture was explicitly mentioned by only four interviewees. Given that these students professed to be Christians and likely come from homes that value the Christian faith, this number seemed surprisingly low. Of the four, only one of the disclosures was framed in a positive light by the participant. Indeed, one student whose interview was not included in this theme said the fact that "scripture wasn't quoted" was a positive aspect to his disclosure. None of the three participants who said theology was discussed in a negative light remembered their disclosure in strongly positive terms, and none said their relationship with their parents improved postdisclosure. In fact, two of the participants from this group discussed their disclosure events in strongly negative terms. Although students were not asked directly why theology or scripture was not helpful, it appeared for this group that the use of theological and scriptural discussion during the event was perceived as a failure by their parents to ensure that they felt heard and understood. It seemed that religious and spiritual tools, or the way they were used, interfered with a better relational connection between parents and children.

What about the other 21 students who did not mention theology or scripture? It is not clear from the interview transcripts whether faith-based discussions were a part of those disclosures or not. The CQR team thought that the most likely conclusions to draw with respect to the absence of theological or biblical notations in the interviews of this highly religious and spiritual sample were either (a) they were simply not a part of the discussions with their parents at all or (b) they were a part of the discussion but not remarkable. The interview data did not include any further information on which to base a theory about these possible conclusions. Further research with faith-based samples should specifically inquire about how theology or scripture was used and then connect it to disclosure outcomes. The study of religion and/or spirituality as moderators of relationship quality before, during, and after disclosure appeared to be warranted from this interviewed sample.

Moreover, and in agreement with previous research (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003), students in this sample were more likely to disclose to their mother before their father, and no student mentioned disclosing to their father before their mother. However, contrary to Maslowe and Yarhouse's (2015) study, which found that parents expressed shock at their child's disclosure, we did not detect a theme for surprise or shock in the interviews. If shock was present in the experience of the parents, the students apparently did not pick it up as a noteworthy dynamic. In fact, 24% of students said without prompting that their parents were not surprised. Parenthetically, it is useful to note that all six of the students who said their parents were not surprised also said their relationship with their parents became more open and honest after the disclosure.

The quality of the relationships that students reported prior to their disclosure did not correspond consistently to the longer term relationship impact as was anticipated. Of the seven students who noted they had positive relationships with their parents prior to the disclosure, four noted a positive longer term impact after the disclosure, whereas three students noted some level of ambivalence (a mixture of positive and negative) in the longer term impacts after the disclosure. Positive relationships prior to disclosure were only weakly connected, at best, with maintained positivity across time. The results strongly suggested this was not a certain outcome in this sample. In agreement with previous researchers (see Samarova, Shilo, & Diamond, 2014; Savin Williams & Dubé, 1998), there was little evidence for a linear relationship for either positive or negative processes from pre- to postdisclosure. Shifts in the quality of the relationship occurred for all three periods that were described by these students—from predisclosure through the disclosure event to the postdisclosure relationship.

Furthermore, attempting to determine how the elements of the disclosure event contributed to the longer term impact of that event on students' relationship with their parents was difficult. There was no straightforward trend in the data. For example, of the seven students who reported a strongly negative disclosure event, only two reported a strongly negative longer term impact on their relationship with their parents. Similarly, of the 10 students who reported that the disclosure had a strongly positive impact over the longer term, only five reported a positive disclosure event. However, most of the strongly positive disclosures ended up being described by the student as positively affecting the relationship. On the basis of these findings, it was reassuring that negative disclosure events were not necessarily connected to negative postdisclosure relationships for all students. This information could be a source of comfort for students who have complicated or even aversive coming-out experiences.

The lack of an expected connection between stated relationship quality in the short and long term further highlights the ambivalence and struggle present in these relationships around disclosure. Rather than interpreting this struggle and ambivalence negatively, however, we can consider another possible interpretation—that this struggle and ambivalence may be a natural result of these important conversations. Of the four interviewees who noted that their parents' views shifted to some degree, three also noted struggle and ambivalence over the longer term. In the end, it may be the presence of continuing conversation itself that contributes the potential for positive movement in these relationships. It seems reasonable to conclude that for these students the presence of a committed relationship that avoids fracturing in the face of disclosure stress provides the most hope for positive growth and longer term satisfaction. Of the seven students who stated that their parents avoided further conversation about these issues, five reported a negative, and none reported a positive, long-term impact in connection with avoidant behaviors. Persistent relationality with parents appeared to

be an implicit but foundational aspect of longer term satisfaction with the disclosure process for this sample.

Implications

Overall, these findings provide greater clarity and context with respect to the factors influencing this sample of Christian college students and their parental disclosure conversations, as well as dynamics leading to and extending from that event. We believe that the achieved thick description allowed for systematic observations grounded in the life experience and context of these diverse Christian LGB students. Understanding these qualitative results for this sample may help students, parents, counselors, and even college or university administrators consider the coming-out process for friends, children, clients, and students in other Christian college settings.

First and foremost, this study suggests that the coming-out experience for students in this sample is varied and complex. This group of students, all living at the intersection of faith and sexuality, was not a monolithic collection sharing similar disclosure experiences. Faith, although a uniting element for this sample, did not appear to strongly influence the outcome in a consistent way, positively or negatively. There was a small group of students who related how religious or spiritual tools were used negatively for them, but most of these highly religious and spiritual students did not find this area noteworthy in their descriptions of the disclosure event. Outcomes of the disclosure process appeared to be more related to the unique relational dynamics between student, mother, father, and the family system. This finding may be relevant for other students preparing to come out, parents who are hearing a disclosure, and counselors who are walking alongside a client in similar circumstances.

Second, it should be recognized that parental relationships continued to be significant for this young adult LGB sample during their higher education years and may be for others in this largely traditional-college-age group. Coming out to parents was shown to be important, as 25 of the original 39 interviewees (64%) made their parents the first disclosure or rated it as a "meaningful" one. This appeared to be the case whether the relationship with parents was described as positive or negative. Most students in this sample desired for their parents to share in their identity development as Christian sexual minorities, although all appeared to experience a sense of risk about coming out, even in the context of positive family relationships. On this basis, counselors and others who advise predisclosure LGB students ought to consider that for this sample, the quality of the relationship prior to disclosure was not a reliable predictor of satisfaction after disclosure. Positive relationships with parents for students in this study appeared to make disclosure easier, but they did not ensure a positive outcome in the long run. These students needed to be aware that the chance for long-term relational success likely required stewardship of each level of the coming-out process.

This study indicated that many parents reportedly suspected their child's sexual identity before the formal disclosure. Consequently, counselors, pastors, teachers, and staff may be well positioned to help prepare suspecting parents for these conversations and subsequent hurdles to ongoing relationship. On the basis of our findings, individuals in these leadership roles could evaluate how parents use theological/doctrinal arguments or other more challenging postures in this complicated relational engagement, and they could then use the results of this evaluation process to decide how best to inform parents of effective ways of inviting healthy disclosure conversations. It appears from the experiences of these students that being an expert on sexuality or faith is not a requirement for helpful conversations, but promoting the desire for an ongoing positive relationship might be beneficial. Counselors and pastors can work with parents or whole family systems to practice basic skills related to active listening, conflict management, and problem-solving.

Third, LGB individuals and their parents may find some relief in the findings described in this article. Although many of the disclosure conversations contained some negativity or even strong negativity, students also reported experiencing positive aspects over the longer term, as the initial difficulty led to more openness and honesty in the parent-child relationships. Thus, a disclosure conversation that is painful or distressing is not necessarily indicative of the lasting effect of the disclosure. However, in agreement with Maslowe and Yarhouse's (2015) findings that parents wrestled through many difficulties after their child's disclosure, this study suggests that even when parent-child relationships ultimately improve, these Christian LGB students realized that they may still wrestle with the family dynamics that result from their disclosure. Thus, this element of struggle could be seen as an expected and important part of the process rather than a difficulty to be avoided.

Finally, parents should be aware that many LGB students in this sample decided to make the disclosure to their parents separately, and when this was the case, the mother was almost always the first to know. Managing secrets and negotiating triangulation in the family system may be helpful topics of discussion for students who are planning to come out to parents. If there is an opportunity to work with parents prior to student disclosure, counselors and pastors can help parents to strategize with respect to how to handle these relational dynamics. Given our interviewees' reports that a number of parents already suspected their child's sexual identity status, some parents may be amenable to engaging in such a preparatory conversation. College counseling centers might consider offering the service of facilitating family disclosure events and follow-up.

Future Directions and Limitations

Future researchers of this religious/spiritual issue would do well to include mixed-method research designs (Davis et al., 2016). Qualitative research will

continue to be useful in developing the theoretical base to support more quantitative investigations of students in Christian colleges and universities, but surveys, for example, might be added to interviews to enrich the data collection for larger samples.

Generalizability to other samples of LGB students and their parents is certainly not automatically supported by this qualitative design, but at this point in the study of Christian students who come out to parents, this interview-based investigation was appropriate and beneficial. Application to other Christian college and university students should be determined on the basis of "transferability," or the degree of similarity or "fit" between the context of this study and the compared setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 124). The responsibility of this article is to provide enough description of the sample and context that it can serve as a starting point for readers and fellow researchers in determining the degree of transferability to another setting. It is hoped that the "rich, thick, detailed description" (Creswell, 2014, p. 211) of this article is sufficiently developed to permit an evaluation of the shared characteristics of this student sample and other samples, but readers and fellow researchers may still have questions about fit when trying to apply the results of this study to another setting.

Affirming the conclusions of Heatherington and Lavner (2008), future researchers would do well to focus on the family dynamics of disclosure. Coming out to parents together or parents separately was often strategically considered by students in this study. The impact of family systems could be incorporated more explicitly in future interview questions or survey items. Furthermore, the faith status of parents should be considered in future studies to describe with greater precision how the religion and spirituality of student and parent might interact before, during, and after disclosure. More robust measures of religiosity or spirituality will also be helpful as this line of research moves forward to more sufficiently describe both students and parents.

Finally, it is hoped that future researchers will engage the timing of theological or scriptural discussions in the disclosure process of Christian students and parents. The current study indicated that most of the students who mentioned the insertion of these topics in their disclosure events found their inclusion to be negative experiences. This study did not question how religion and spirituality might affect predisclosure interactions or postdisclosure processes. Such inquiry seems necessary for students, like those in this study, who are highly religious and spiritual. The assertion in this qualitative study that relationality might be a determining factor for how doctrinal positions are managed between students and parents across the disclosure process is worthy of further exploration in future research.

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