

**Moving Toward Understanding and Acceptance:  
Parents' Experiences After Finding Out Their Children are Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual**

by

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## **Dedication**

**I dedicate this thesis to my parents,  
who have been constant sources of love and support in my life.**

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## Abstract

In this thesis, I examined parents' experiences after finding out that their children are gay, lesbian, and bisexual. Through qualitative inquiry, 12 parents (7 mothers and 5 fathers) were interviewed to develop an in-depth analysis of their thoughts, feelings, and actions in relation to having gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. All of the parents were Canadian citizens residing in Nova Scotia except for one visiting American citizen. After finding out, parents went through a process of understanding and acceptance, in which they (a) made sense of past experiences they had with their children, (b) reacted emotionally to finding out, (c) changed their perspectives on issues, and (d) shared their experiences with others. The process was complex, non-linear, and dependant on an interaction of aiding and hindering factors (e.g., mass media, religion, friends, family, and past experiences) found at society, community, family, and individual levels. At all levels, homophobia, biphobia, and heterosexism hindered parents' ability to understand and accept their children. Finally, strategies are suggested that researchers, educators, health professionals, media personnel, parent support groups, and parents themselves can use to help parents understand and accept their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children.

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

Although it is well understood that coming out to parents is one of the most important and difficult tasks gay<sup>1</sup>, lesbian, and bisexual people face in establishing their sexual identities, little research had been undertaken to understand the issues and concerns parents have after they find out that their children are gay, lesbian, and bisexual. Recent studies suggest that gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth are coming out to parents more frequently, and at earlier ages, than in the past (Health Canada, 1996; Pearlman, 1992; Ben-Ari, 1995). Although it is recognized that coming out to parents can have serious developmental consequences for youth, (e.g., ostracism, rejection, isolation, and violence) (Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993; Savin-Williams, 1996; Muller, 1987; Murphy, 1989) the developmental consequences for parents in relation to finding out they have gay, lesbian, and bisexual children have generally been overlooked.

A sense of security and accomplishment in parenthood often depends on the knowledge that children have turned out “okay” in their adult lives (Boxer, Cook, & Herdt, 1991). The knowledge that their children have been successfully launched into adulthood gives parents the freedom to attend to their own developmental concerns. Parents who find out that their children are gay, lesbian, and bisexual may develop

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<sup>1</sup>The order in which I present the terms “gay, lesbian, and bisexual” is not meant to be hierarchical; however, for conciseness, I occasionally use the term gay to mean gay, lesbian, and bisexual.

insecurities about their parenting skills and worry about their children's safety and well-being. Parents may become too caught up in their struggle to understand and accept their children to attend to their own developmental concerns.

Furthermore, the coming out of gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth may initiate a parallel process for their parents. Through their close association with their children, parents may be affected by homophobia, biphobia, and heterosexism in ways that compromise their quality of life. In light of the fact that little research has been done with parents of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, and to investigate the potential quality of life consequences for these parents, I chose to investigate the nature, and implications, of parents' experiences after finding out they have gay, lesbian, and bisexual children.

### Purpose

The purpose of this study was threefold. First, it gave parents an opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings on having gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. Second, it promoted awareness of the harmful effects of homophobia, biphobia, and heterosexism on parents of gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. And, third, it provided information that was used by the members of the Halifax Chapter of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) in assembling a brochure about the issues parents face after they find out their children are gay, lesbian, and bisexual.

### Research Questions

My research questions helped me formulate the questions I used during the

interviews, however, they did not guide subsequent data analysis or interpretation. They were:

1. What do parents initially think, feel, and do after finding out that their children are gay, lesbian, and bisexual?
2. How do parents' thoughts, emotions, and actions change overtime?
3. What are parents' perceived needs in terms of social support, information, and resources immediately and in the long term after children disclose that they are gay, lesbian, and bisexual?

### Definition of Terms

Homosexuality, in common usage, means attraction to one's own sex. The terms gay and lesbian refer to male and female homosexuality, respectively (Rathus, Nevid, & Fichner-Rathus, 1997). Although these definitions do not appear to be conceptually challenging, there are problems with them as identity categories. Jagose (1996) states, "deciding exactly what constitutes homosexuality—or, more pragmatically, who is homosexual—is far from self-evident" (p. 7). Although many individuals fit the definitions of homosexual, gay, and lesbian, in that they are only attracted to and only have relationships with members of the same sex, there are other people whose behavior challenge their definitions. These other people include men who identify as heterosexual, are married with children, but have sex with men on occasion. They include women who identify as lesbian, but have male sexual partners. They also include women who have relationships with women because they connect to them intellectually, emotionally,

spiritually, but not necessarily sexually. Historical and cross-cultural accounts of homosexuality make further confusion of its definition. In ancient Greece, married adult men took sexual interest in adolescent boys, often with the blessing of the boy's parents. Fathers in the Siwanese society of North Africa expect juvenile males to engage in homosexual relations with older men, until the ages of 16 to 20, after which they marry women (Rathus et al.). These examples suggest that sexual orientation is more complex and fluid than the common definitions of homosexual, gay, and lesbian allow.

Bisexuality, or attraction to both men and women, may account for some of the behavior mentioned above that renders the terms homosexual, gay, and lesbian problematic. However, the concept of bisexuality has other problems. With the construction of homosexuality and heterosexuality as mutually exclusive categories, bisexuality, as a category of identification, has largely been rendered invisible (Trepanier, 1998). Bisexuality is more often thought of as behavior within the categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality. Thus, it is limited in its use as an identity category because of its inaccessibility. Other problems concerning bisexuality are described later in this chapter.

Although identity categories such as homosexual, gay, lesbian, and bisexual can not capture the cultural and historical diversity that pertains to sexual orientation, they provide a way to discuss same-sex desire and behavior. Hence, I provide below, a list of terms and their definitions that I use with caution throughout this thesis. All definitions except for "biphobia," "heterosexism," and "queer" have been referenced from Rathus et al. (1997); I have included the references for these three with their definitions.

**Gay.** Gay men are men who are erotically attracted to and desire to form romantic relationships with other men.

**Lesbian.** Lesbians are women who are erotically attracted to and desire to form romantic relationships with other women.

**Bisexual.** Bisexuals are individuals who are erotically attracted to and interested in developing romantic relationships with both men and women.

**Heterosexual.** Heterosexuals are individuals who are erotically attracted to and desire forming romantic relationships with members of the opposite sex.

**Homophobia.** Homophobia is a cluster of negative attitudes and feelings toward gay people, including intolerance, hatred, and fear.

**Biphobia.** Biphobia is prejudice, negative attitudes, and misconceptions relating to bisexual people (Kelly, 1998).

**Heterosexism.** Heterosexism is the biased and discriminatory assumption that people are, or should be attracted to members of the opposite sex (Kelly, 1998).

**Coming out.** Coming out is a process by which a gay, lesbian, or bisexual person accepts and discloses his or her sexual orientation to others.

**Queer.** Queer is an umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications (Jagose, 1996).

### **Historical and Socio-Political Context of Homosexuality**

I provide a historical and socio-political context of homosexuality from the mid-1800s to the present time for two reasons: First, the context facilitates my analysis and

interpretation of the interview data and, second, it presents to the reader background information by which to make sense of my analysis and interpretation.

Religious and legal forces have condemned and prosecuted homosexual behavior for centuries. Although homosexual behavior has been reported throughout Western world history, psychological, psychiatric, and medical discourses began labeling people as homosexual around 1870 (Jagose, 1996). Before that time, same-sex attraction and same-sex unions existed without a corresponding category of identification. Some theorists have suggested that homosexual identity invention began with the advent of free-labor systems in capitalism that gave new meaning to family life (D'Emilio, 1992; Weeks, 1977). Free labor systems enabled individuals to earn a living without being a part of a family, and thus "made it possible for homosexual desire to coalesce into a personal identity" (D'Emilio, p. 8). Soon after homosexual was defined as an identifiable type of person, resistance movements formed to eradicate discrimination against homosexuals, which include the homophile movement, the gay and lesbian liberation movement, and the queer movement (Jagose).

The homophile movement. In the early 1900's, legal system professionals, police, medical professionals, clergy, media persons, and social workers clearly established homosexuality as a deviant, sinful, self-destructive, and socially threatening behavior (Kinsman, 1987). It was around this time that the homophile movement emerged to protest discrimination against homosexuals (Jagose, 1996). The Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis were two homophile organizations that emerged in the 1950s. One of their anti-discrimination strategies was to declare that homosexuals had mental and

psychic abnormalities, but they should be protected under the Declaration of Independence. They also petitioned governments, sought statements from political candidates, and published and distributed political pamphlets and newsletters (Jagose). However, the homophile movement had little success in creating better living conditions for homosexuals as they did not challenge psychiatric theories that defined homosexuality as a disease. Governments incorporated and maintained “gross indecency” and “sodomy” laws in their Criminal Codes (Kinsman). But despite their seemingly unsuccessful attempt at eradicating homosexual discrimination, the homophile movement did set the stage for a more successful organization, namely, the gay and lesbian liberation movement.

The gay and lesbian liberation movement. In 1969, the Stonewall riots marked the symbolic beginning of a new gay and lesbian liberation movement (Jagose, 1996). These riots occurred when police raided The Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York. The patrons of the bar resisted arrests, which escalated into a weekend of riots. The news of these riots was heard around much of the Western world and it evoked large scale social transformation. Unlike the homophile movement, which presented images of homosexuality that would be acceptable to mainstream society, gay liberationists subverted the pressures to conform to heterosexual norms and developed a new sense of identity based on pride in being gay (Jagose). They were also different from homophiles in that they discredited professional opinion. In 1973, gay liberationists pressured the American Psychiatric Association to remove homosexuality from its classification of mental disorders (Kinsman, 1987). They did this by speaking out against the “expert”

advice of psychiatrists and demanded that their personal experiences be validated. They emphasized the importance of “coming out” and publicly declared homosexuality as a legitimate way of being in society (Jagose). Many of the viewpoints and strategies of gay liberation exist today. This is because gay, lesbian, and bisexual people still struggle to come out and be proud of their sexual orientation, and there are still mediums in which homosexuality is pathologized. However, the 1990s has brought a new sensibility to gay and lesbian liberation, known as queer. As Jagose writes,

many of the ideological assumptions of gay liberation are very much in evidence in the 1990s. Yet its promotion of identity, its commitment to some “natural” and polymorphous sexuality underlying social organization, its understanding of power predominantly in terms of repression and its belief in the possibility of large-scale social transformation or liberation are all challenged by the new knowledge and practices mobilized around queer (p. 43).

The queer movement. The queer movement began in the early 1990s in response to a growing dissatisfaction, primarily among gay, lesbian, and bisexual political activists and academics, that the concepts of gay and lesbian no longer apply to current theories of identity. These current theories suggest that there are limits to gay and lesbian identities, such as the ones I described under the “definition of terms” section. Although gay liberationists reified these identities in order to instill pride in those who are sexually marginalized, queer theorists have adopted the post-structuralist sensibility that “the very notion of identity as a coherent and abiding sense of self is perceived as a cultural fantasy rather than a demonstrable fact” (Jagose, 1996, p. 82). Jagose further states that queer theory has been greatly influenced by Foucault’s writings on sexuality and power, in which he suggests that power is not a fundamentally repressive force. Rather, where there is power, there is resistance, and through this resistance, power induces pleasure, forms



knowledge, and produces discourse. Informed by Foucault's ideology, many queer theorists differ from gay liberation strategists in that they oppose protesting and speaking out against homosexual oppression and propose that "the aim of oppositional politics is not liberation but resistance" (Halperin, 1995).

However, just as the homophile movement facilitated the gay liberation movement, it is through the success of gay liberation that one can begin to discuss its limits and move into the realm of queer. Because gay liberation strategists are still gradually gaining success in mainstream society, their politics, ideology, and practices primarily inform my discussion and analysis of the experiences of parents who have gay, lesbian, and bisexual children.

#### Study Limitations With Regards to Bisexuality

Many issues and concerns pertaining to bisexuality are beyond the scope of this study. However, I have invited the participation of parents of bisexuals for two reasons: First, I include bisexuality in an effort to increase its visibility because mainstream and gay and lesbian communities often treat it as if it is non-existent or transitional. Otherwise, bisexuals are stereotyped as confused or dishonest about their sexual orientation, promiscuous, and non-monogamous (Rust, 1995). Among gays and lesbians, bisexuality is also often perceived as a threat or political weakness because bisexuals are open to having opposite-sex relationships and thus are able to take advantage of heterosexual privilege. As one lesbian commented, "in a more egalitarian society, I'd be much more supportive of women who choose to sleep with men, but now, I'd prefer them

to unite with lesbian women and build the strength of our community and movement” (Rust, p. 1). Thus, bisexuals experience the detrimental effects of biphobia in both heterosexual and homosexual contexts. Second, despite the unique challenges faced by bisexuals, there is a commonality between them and gays and lesbians, namely, that bisexuals who have same-sex partners face homophobia and heterosexism like gays and lesbians. It is both the invisibility of bisexuals, and the similarities between them and gays and lesbians that has informed my inclusion of them.

### Summary

In this introductory chapter, I explained why it is important to understand the concerns of parents of gay, lesbian, and bisexual children and I provided the purpose of this study. I also provided a definition of terms and explained the limits of identity categorization. I placed homosexuality in historical and socio-political contexts, and, finally, discussed the study limitations with regards to bisexuality.

Chapter two contains a review of background literature relevant to parents’ experiences after finding out they have gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. In chapter three, I describe the methods and procedures I used in gathering, interpreting, and analyzing my data. Chapter four is titled “Moving Towards Understanding and Acceptance,” in which I explore parents’ understanding and acceptance of their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children by providing a content analysis of the interview data. In chapter five, I discuss and analyze factors that influence parental understanding and acceptance, based on both the interview data and the research literature. Finally, in

**chapter six, I suggest strategies for helping parents and recommendations for future research.**

## Chapter Two

### Literature Review

In reviewing the literature, I have used previous research to help raise my awareness of important issues pertaining to the research questions. However, I avoid becoming restricted by trying to fit the reality of the lives of the participants of my study into “a framework developed from previous published analyses” (Morse & Field, 1995, p. 46). The following literature review covers three major areas that are relevant to my study: (a) homophobia, biphobia, and heterosexism; (b) coming out; and (c) parental reactions when their children come out.

#### Homophobia, Biphobia, and Heterosexism

Homophobia. Most gay, lesbian, and bisexual people are subjected to homophobia, which is an irrational fear and hatred of individuals who love, and are sexually attracted to, members of the same sex (Bernstein, 1995). Homophobia is often expressed through violence and rejection. In a Nova Scotia survey of 300 gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, 85% of women and 95% of men reported homophobic abuse through verbal, physical, or sexual assault (Smith, 1993). In a similar American survey, 90% of 2000 gays and lesbians surveyed had experienced some type of verbal or physical abuse due to homophobia (Uribe & Harbeck, 1992). Gay, lesbian, and bisexual people also face rejection and the threat of rejection by friends, family, and religious leaders, as

well as the denial of housing, employment, and educational services (Smith).

Many organized religious groups are overtly homophobic. For example, conservative Judeo-Christians view homosexuality as a sin against God and nature (Health Canada, 1996). Forty-one percent of 300 gay, lesbian, and bisexuals in Nova Scotia reported experiencing harassment and discrimination from church groups and other religious organizations (Smith, 1993). One lesbian commented, "I seriously think we have to abolish religion because that's the seed of most oppression.... If you got rid of religion, you'd get rid of the holier-than-thou attitude that seems to give a lot of cause for self-evaluation" (Smith, p. 36). Arguments against homosexuality often cause internal moral conflicts for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. Herdt and Bower (1993) concluded that "gay teens are exposed to a double-bind--on the one hand they are expected to be honest and truthful, while on the other, they learn that their desires are bad, and should be hidden, causing an intolerable torment to their mental health" (p. 245).

False information and distortion about homosexuality leads to stereotyping, which denies gays and lesbians their individual characteristics. When gay men are stereotyped as pedophiles, employers justify the denial of employment and gay bashers justify violence. Stereotyping also leads to "blaming the victim." Through homophobia, gay, lesbian, and bisexual people are attacked for causing moral decay, breaking up families, spreading AIDS, and even threatening the survival of the human species (Pharr, 1988).

Biphobia. Biphobia is the irrational fear and hatred of those who are attracted to members of both sexes. Like gays and lesbians, bisexuals are subjected to discrimination, harassment, and violence on the basis of their sexual attractions and relationships. They

receive this harassment from both heterosexual and gay and lesbian communities.

Hostility arises from the misperception that bisexuals are primarily responsible for transmitting HIV from gay populations to heterosexual populations (Kelly, 1998).

Hostility also arises because bisexuality challenges the “us” versus “them” mentality that people use to create the binary categories of heterosexual and homosexual (Trepanier, 1998). As one bisexual stated, “bisexuals are perceived as too transgressive, perhaps because we blur what people consider to be very clear lines separating THEM from US” (Tucker, 1995).

Heterosexism. Heterosexism is the assumption that everyone is heterosexual, and that forming relationships with members of the opposite sex is the only normal and natural way of expressing one’s sexuality (Bernstein, 1995). Heterosexism is at work when the media, education system, and historical accounts hide or distort homosexuality, provide false information about homosexuality, and do not portray positive and representative images of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. It reinforces the myths that they are either non-existent or freakish (Pharr, 1988). Health Canada (1996) suggests that “the heterosexual bias in educational materials and the lack of information regarding homosexuality leaves many gay youth with little support for many of their special needs and interests” (p. 19). Heterosexism works in conjunction with heterosexual privilege, in which one receives merit on the basis of his or her presumed heterosexuality. These privileges include spousal benefits, job promotions, and the permission to publicly display affection (Smith, 1993). Politicians use their heterosexual privilege to gain voter support by displaying portraits of their spouses and children in their promotional

brochures.

Parental involvement in homophobia, biphobia, and heterosexism. Parents of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people can both contribute to societal homophobia, biphobia, and heterosexism, and be victims of them. They can contribute by making jokes or negative comments about gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, as well as by threatening their children with physical and verbal abuse. A New Brunswick study found that 27% of 176 gay, lesbian, and bisexual people had experienced verbal abuse from their families (Smith, 1993). Some parents disown, ostracize, and throw their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children out of their homes, setting youth up for social, economic, and psychological harm (Health Canada, 1996). Muller (1987) found that many children, who had told parents of their non-heterosexual orientations, had to learn to accept the absence of parents and their approval as a fact of life. Muller states, “even as adult daughters and sons, the experience of parental rejection is both sharp and long-lasting: it attacks our roots, our essence” (p. 142). Some parents learn a sobering lesson when, after years of rejecting, demoralizing, and hounding a child to “change” his or her homosexual orientation, the child commits suicide (Aarons, 1995).

Parents of gay, lesbian, and bisexual children also are victims of societal homophobia, biphobia, and heterosexism. They have to deal with the stigma of having a gay, lesbian, and bisexual child. They may blame themselves for not filling the normative expectations of society, being a bad parent, or for having a bad gene pool (Health Canada, 1996). By embracing their children’s sexual orientations, parents are subject to parallel discrimination and oppression.

A father of a gay son commented,

I've never been on the outside. I've never had a door slammed in my face because I was the wrong religion, wrong color, the wrong educational status [or because] I looked funny. Whatever you'd like to think of, I didn't have any of these things that ever made me feel I'm a part of a minority and you can imagine how I feel when now, I've suddenly been moved, by association, to a group that is a vulnerable and discriminated against minority. And I'm not a homosexual. It's changed me (Thompson, 1997, p. 7).

Homophobic, biphobic, and heterosexist discrimination affect parents and their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children differently than other forms of oppression. A white mother of a gay son remarked that

a child who is Black, Latino, or Asian presumably lives in a family made up of the same ethnic group, or at least lives in a family all too aware of the difficulties involved in being a part of that minority group. But gay children grow up alone. They aren't part of any group, least of all do they feel they are like the others in their own family (Dew, 1994, p. 32).

When parents learn their children are gay, lesbian, and bisexual, they too may feel isolated from the rest of the world. Many can not seek support from friends, family, or professionals for fear of rejection. As a result, they do not realize that there are other parents who have gay, lesbian, and bisexual children who can offer the comfort of shared oppression (Mattison & McWhirter, 1995).

### Coming Out

Coming out is defined as the acknowledgment and communication of one's sexual orientation. Heterosexuals do not need to come out due to the presumption that everyone is heterosexual. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual people often need to come out, accepting their homosexuality or bisexuality first within themselves, then disclosing to others, in order to



develop self-identity. Coming out is a life-long process for many gay, lesbian, and bisexual people because they must constantly negate heterosexist assumptions made by people they meet throughout their lives.

Disclosure becomes necessary because, unlike race or gender, which are overt physical indicators of a social group membership, sexual orientation is often invisible or can be hidden (Strommen, 1989). Anxiety is common among children who are thinking of coming out to their parents (Borhek, 1987). The research literature indicates that parental discovery of a child's homosexuality generally leads to family crisis or emotional distress. In any case, having to reveal one's sexual orientation can be a necessary challenge to clarify any heterosexist misconceptions. Common reasons given for disclosure are being honest rather than living a lie, opening up communication, strengthening family bonds, deepening love, and providing opportunities for mutual support and caring (Ben-Ari, 1995).

In general, gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth are more likely to come out to mothers than to fathers (Savin-Williams, 1989). Holtzen and Agresti (1990) suggest that children are more likely to disclose to parents who are relatively non-homophobic. They also suggest that disclosure occurs more frequently with younger parents than with older. Similarly, coming out may be occurring at younger ages in our society, due in part to an increased emphasis on sexuality in general, acceptance of homosexuality, and the availability of information concerning homosexuality (Holtzen & Agresti).

### Parental Reactions to Disclosure

Factors affecting parental reactions to the realization that their children are gay, lesbian, and bisexual have been outlined by Collins and Zimmerman (1983) and Devine (1984). Although the information is dated, these researchers suggested that “regulative structures” and “parental themes” could predict parental reactions. Devine discussed three themes that produce conflict: (a) the family should maintain respectability at all costs, which puts family status above acceptance of a child; (b) the family can solve its own problems, which implies that the gay child is a problem that needs fixing; and (c) family members should follow religious teachings, which imply the rejection of a gay child if religious teachings condemn homosexuality. Two other ambiguous themes that would influence parental reactions are love, which motivates the parent to try to accept the child’s identity, and conventionality, which implies rejection to uphold social values (Devine). Finally, Strommen (1989) suggests that parents may not be able to accept and integrate their children’s sexual orientation if they hold rigid and separate gender roles.

When children come out to their parents, the news most often evokes a negative parental response. Strommen (1989) states that it “creates for the parent, a subjective perception that the child is suddenly a stranger, a ‘member of another species, someone whose essential wants are unrecognizable and different’” (p. 40). Robinson, Walters, and Skeen (1989) found that only 2% of parents said they were glad to learn that their children were gay, lesbian, or bisexual and, even then, the positive responses were more because their suspicions were confirmed, not that they were truly happy that their child was a part of a sexual minority. Most parents reported experiencing emotions such as

shock, denial, guilt, confusion, anger, and acceptance.

**Shock.** Shock was a very common emotion immediately following disclosure. One father described the discovery that his child was gay like being hit in the face with a brick (Muller, 1987). Shock is experienced because parents form images of their children dating members of the opposite sex, marrying, and eventually having a family through a heterosexual union. Very few parents ponder the sexual orientation of their newborn children. Often, parents can not connect their children to the distorted gay, lesbian, and bisexual images portrayed by the media (Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1996). As one parent stated, “Laurie didn’t fit my image of a lesbian, as a woman who looked, acted, and dressed like a man. She was petite, pretty, bright, and charming (Rafkin, 1996, p. 19).

**Denial.** Many parents experience a period of denial, a time when they are not willing to entertain the notion that their children are gay, lesbian, and bisexual. Denying the existence of their children’s sexual orientations can give them the opportunity to absorb the information (Griffin, Wirth, & Wirth, 1990). One woman said, “I thought it was not really true. she would still meet someone from the opposite sex with whom she could have an intimate relationship” (Robinson et al., 1989, p. 66). Denial is often expressed when a parent frequently dismisses his or her child’s gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity as a phase that will pass (Mattison & McWhirter, 1995).

**Guilt.** Strommen (1989) describes guilt as when parents feel they “somehow caused their child to become homosexual and therefore are responsible” (p. 40). Bernstein (1990) explained that parents who blamed themselves tried to remember situations

involving their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. One woman remembered that she spotted during pregnancy and wondered if that had anything to do with it. Another mother made a causal link to the fact that her gay son (along with her other children) had joined her and her husband in bed many times during childhood. Other reasons for how parents thought they were to blame were being divorced, being too strict, being a strong mother, being alcoholic, having little time for a daughter when she was a child, not being available emotionally in the child's early years, being an insufficient male role model, being artistic, being a man-hater, and being a dominant wife (Bernstein).

Anger. Anger can be fueled by shock, denial, guilt, and hostility towards homosexuality. One child recalls, "Dad escorted me to the garage where I was harassed. 'You fucking queer, you goddamn faggot...sissy.... Do you actually have sex with your lover?' (Savin-Williams, 1989, p. 3). Another parent stated, "I was angry. What the hell is he doing this to me for? The other three [kids] were perfectly normal" (Thompson, 1997, p. 1). Anger is also expressed at society in general, "what did I do to deserve this" or "why is this happening to me?" (Robinson et al., 1989, p. 66).

Acceptance. The acceptance phase is often dependent upon working through the other phases and is often felt later. Mattison and McWhirter (1995) suggest that parents who accept and integrate their child's sexual orientation are often publicly open and non-defensive about it. Others live their lives quietly without announcing or even reflecting upon their children as gay, lesbian, and bisexual, but are always willing to be open and do not need to deny it. One woman expressed her acceptance of her child: "I was pleased he had found himself, had friends, I wanted him to know I loved him" (Robinson et al.,

1989, p. 67).

Acceptance is not to be confused with tolerance. Some parents “tolerate” their children’s sexual orientation, implying that they are doing their child a favor by putting up with his or her differences (Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1996). Tolerance can come in the form of a condescending tone, or disregard for the child’s partner. One woman remarked, “while no one in my family has disowned me or anything like that, I’ve noticed that there is a hesitancy now.... I’m in a relationship, but there are people in my family who will never mention my partner’s name. They will not ask anything. Nothing” (Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women, p. 33).

### Summary

In this literature review, I have outlined some general areas of research that have sensitized me to issues related to parental experiences of having gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. Specifically, I have presented literature on (a) homophobia, biphobia, and heterosexism, (b) coming out, and (c) parental reactions upon disclosure.

## Chapter Three

### Research Approach and Design

This study was conducted within a naturalistic-qualitative paradigm. I chose this paradigm because it enabled me to make sense of parental experiences within the contexts of their lives. The study design was flexible and emergent; I gathered information in natural settings, and I was aware that my findings were context-bound (Guba, 1981). I chose qualitative methods to collect, analyze, and interpret my findings because they allowed for emic (i.e., the participants') description of phenomena and recognized indigenous knowledge and expertise (Morse & Field, 1995; Patton, 1987). Finally, I choose a naturalistic-qualitative approach because my intent was not to test theory or to make causal inferences, but rather to acquire and interpret in-depth and meaningful accounts of the experiences of parents after they found out that their children were gay, lesbian, and bisexual.

#### Sampling

To identify potential participants, I began by using maximum variation sampling, which "aims at capturing and describing the central themes or principal outcomes that cut across a great deal of variation" (Patton, 1987, p. 53). I had hoped to acquire a sample that was diverse in terms of race, class, and gender. However, I became aware very early in the process of data collection that parents of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people are a

difficult population to reach. I was unsuccessful in contacting parents through gay, lesbian, and bisexual organizations, such as JUKA, a gay, lesbian, and bisexual organizations for African Canadians, and the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth Project. Finding parents through gay, lesbian, and bisexual friends and acquaintances was also difficult. When I asked my friends and acquaintances to ask their parents if they would be willing to be interviewed, the typical response was “I told my Mom I was gay, but there is no way she would ever want to be interviewed.” I eventually resorted to a convenience sample, in which I interviewed parents who were easily contacted and interviewed. My main source for finding participants was Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), which is a support group for friends and family of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. One of the group organizers called various members and asked them if they would mind if I mailed them an invitation to participate in my study. After receiving a list of names, I mailed out eight letters and received telephone calls from seven PFLAG members. I also received two phone calls from parents of gay, lesbian, and bisexual friends of mine. Despite having to resort to convenience sampling, I managed to acquire a relatively diverse sample

Demographic characteristics of participants. Twelve participants were interviewed in total; seven mothers and five fathers. Six interviews were with just one parent and three interviews were with both parents. I did not ask participants their racial or ethnic backgrounds; however, two participants said they immigrated to Canada from England, one identified as Chinese Canadian, one identified as Jewish and one lived in San Francisco and was visiting Halifax. The other participants did not self-identify. Nine

parents were married and three were divorced and single. Eight had gay sons, three had bisexual daughters and one had a lesbian daughter. The participants' socio-economic status ranged from highly paid professionals with multiple degrees to parents with very low incomes and educational status.

Strengths and limitations of the sample. The primary strength of the sample was that most parents had done a lot of thinking, listening, and speaking about having gay, lesbian, and bisexual children at monthly PFLAG meetings. As a result, they were well prepared for the interview and were very articulate. However, the sample was limited because I was unable to interview parents who were uncomfortable with, or not interested in talking about their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children.

### Instrumentation

During the data collection phase of my research, I engaged in intense dialogue with participants, both during formal interviewing and informal conversation. During the interviews, I used a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix A). Before arranging my first interview, I showed the guide to my advisor, my thesis committee members, and five PFLAG members. Their suggestions and input helped to formulate questions. The interview guide was quite helpful during some interviews, but not so helpful in others. For example, one mother seemed to know exactly what she wanted to say beforehand and did not need or want to be probed. Other parents were sparse with their answers and needed probing. In one interview, I went through my questions in 30 minutes, but then we had a lively and lengthy discussion after the tape machine was turned off. Other parents



responded with very elaborate answers to my interview questions, taking up to 1 hour and 45 minutes to complete the interview. As my fieldwork progressed, additions and minor changes were made to the interview guide as I developed a sense of what I wanted to explore in my analysis. All changes to the interview guide have been documented (see Appendix A).

After my first interview, I created a journal of what Geertz (1973) coined “thick description,” in which I extensively and carefully described the time, place, and physical and social environments in which the interviews took place. This journal helped me reflect on the interview process, and it brought back memories of the interviews during later analysis.

### Data Collection Procedures

I collected my data in two main ways: through depth interviews and by attending monthly PFLAG meetings. Patton (1987) described depth interviewing as “asking open-ended questions, listening to and recording the answer, and then following up with additional relevant questions” (p. 108). I used depth interviewing because I wanted to acquire a sense of how these parents thought, felt, and acted, and how they organized meaning in their world. The interviews were semi-structured and ranged from 30 to 105 minutes. All interviews took place in the participants’ residences, except for one, which took place in the home of the participant’s daughter. The interviews themselves were more of a discussion than a question-and-answer period. Many parents asked me questions about being gay and said they learned a lot from the interview and that they

“enjoyed the exchange.” All interviews were tape recorded, with the consent of the participants.

I also gathered information during monthly PFLAG meetings, in which I engaged in informal conversations with parents. Patton (1987) defines informal conversation as “the spontaneous generation of questions in the natural flow of an interaction, typically an interview that occurs as part of ongoing participant observation fieldwork” (p. 110). At the beginning of data collection, I was not sure if it would be appropriate for me to attend regular PFLAG meetings; however, after the first few meetings, I developed a sense that my presence was welcome. Before, during, and after the meetings, I had enlightening conversations with parents about their concerns and questions regarding gay, lesbian, and bisexual life. For example, one mother asked me the following question on the way home from a meeting: “As a gay man, do you ever have the desire to dress up in women’s clothing or want to look like a woman?” At another time, a father made the following comment: “I think I understand gays and lesbians, but I am really confused about bisexuality.” It was by sharing my thoughts on questions and comments like these that made me feel that my presence at PFLAG meetings was appropriate and useful. I did not intend to become a regular member of PFLAG; however, after the first few meetings, I realized that I was learning a lot from the lively discussions and that my presence was appreciated.

Most of the time during meetings, I quietly listened to what parents had to say and observed the interactions between parents. This observation provided context and meaning within the cultural setting that helped me form my analysis and interpretation of

these parents thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

### Data Analysis and Interpretation

Analyzing and interpreting qualitative data are often long, arduous, creative, and intellectually rigorous processes. Patton (1987) defines analysis as “the process of bringing order to the data, organizing what is there into patterns, categories, and basic descriptive units” (p. 144). Interpretation involves attaching meaning and significance to the analysis, explaining descriptive patterns, and looking for relationships and linkages among descriptive dimensions” (p. 144).

I began my analysis and interpretation by reviewing my initial research questions. I hired a transcriber to transcribe the nine interviews tapes onto paper and computer disk. I put the paper copies and a back-up disk of the transcriptions in a safe place and I worked with two other copies, one on my computer’s hard drive and one on disk. I then mailed to each interviewee a photocopied version of their interview transcript along with a letter thanking them for their participation (see Appendix B). They had the option of reading the transcript and mailing back any additions or corrections. I carried out these member checks to re-assure my participants that if they said something on tape that they afterward regretted saying, they would have the option of deleting it from the transcript. Most participants did not have any serious problems with the content of their interviews. The only changes that parents requested were grammatical.

Initially, I listened to a few interviews on audio tape and jotted down potential themes and patterns. After listening to the third audio tape, I changed my approach and

opened up the interview files on my computer. I found it to be more efficient to work with the interviews directly in my word processor. I changed the text of each interview to a different color, so I could easily trace quotes once I started cutting and pasting. I then created four new files; physical health, mental health, emotional health, and spiritual health; thinking that through this system, I could organize the data in a meaningful way. I went through every interview and cut and pasted sections of the interview that I thought fit into any of these four categories. However, as I did that, I realized that the interview data did not fit well in this system. After going through the interviews once, I opened each of the four new files and thought about how the categories could be changed so the data would fit better. What eventually emerged turned into chapter four--a content analysis of the data. At this point, it became apparent that my analysis was not guided by my initial research questions, but by analytic insights that emerged during data collection.

After most of the data was organized into themes, I met with a peer and showed her my analysis in progress. Debriefing with her was helpful because it enabled me to think about, articulate, and justify my analysis. She also gave me constructive feedback on my analysis, and some potential directions I could take with it. I also re-read the original interviews and found passages that I had overlooked. I then cut and pasted them into the appropriate categories and shifted others that fit better elsewhere. Upon completing chapter four, I realized that it was mostly analysis of the data and had virtually no interpretation. I decided then, that chapter five would be devoted to a meaningful interpretation, not only of the themes that emerged in chapter four, but also of the broader context of my participants' realities. My interpretation in chapter five was informed by

the interviews, the informal conversations with parents, my observations at PFLAG meetings, my life experiences, and the literature.

### Ethical Considerations

Not harming the research participants was a high priority for me during data collection and analysis. Hence, I took a number of precautions to ensure the protection of participants. First, a letter was sent to prospective participants outlining the purpose and methods of the study (see Appendix C). A consent form (see Appendix D) was signed by all participants, which explained that their remarks would be treated in a confidential manner, that their participation was strictly voluntary, that their participation could be stopped at any time, and that their identities would be protected through the use of pseudonyms. The study received ethical approval from Dalhousie University's Faculty of Graduate Studies on September 26<sup>th</sup>, 1997.

### Summary

This study operated within a naturalistic-qualitative paradigm. I used maximum variation sampling and convenience sampling to identify potential participants. Data collection occurred through depth interviewing and informal conversation. In terms of analysis, I organized the data into themes and made interpretations regarding the broad contexts of my participants realities. Finally, I took a number of ethical precautions to ensure the protection of participants.

## Chapter Four

### Moving Toward Understanding and Acceptance

In this chapter, I summarize the main themes that emerged from the interview data. At the time of interviewing, all parents knew that their children were gay, lesbian, and bisexual. Most found out through conversations with, or letters from, their children, whereas some found out before their children told them. Most parents said that finding out was a significant event in their lives. Finding out was followed by moving towards understanding and acceptance of their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children, during which they developed thoughts, feelings, and actions that changed, overtime, as they accommodated this new information. Prior to finding out, a few parents were already very understanding and accepting of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people and, thus, had very little difficulty understanding and accepting their children. However, many parents made significant changes in their move toward understanding and acceptance, which are presented later in this chapter. Before I present the main themes that emerged from the interviews data, I define understanding and acceptance in the context of this study, and I discuss understanding and acceptance in relation to “coming out.”

### Defining Understanding and Acceptance

In developing the definitions of understanding and acceptance, I reflected on the interviews I had with parents and the discussions I participated in during PFLAG

sense that much of the dialogue was about moving toward understanding and accepting their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. Thus the definitions I present here are based on my empirical data.

**Understanding.** For this study, I present a four-fold definition of understanding. Understanding entails (a) acquiring knowledge about homosexuality and bisexuality, (b) being able to distinguish myth from reality in terms of sexual orientation, (c) learning about their children's feelings toward their own sexual identity, and (d) being able to recognize issues and concerns that their children face with regards to being gay, lesbian, and bisexual (e.g., homophobia, gay-bashing, discrimination, and coming out).

Some parents I spoke with said they grew up knowing nothing about homosexuality and bisexuality. One mother said that it was not until her third year of university that she realized that some women were attracted to, and had relationships with, other women. Learning about what the terms gay, lesbian, and bisexual mean was often an important first step for parents in understanding their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. Some commonly held myths about gays and lesbians are that they want to be members of the opposite sex (Nevid, Fichner-Rathus, & Rathus, 1995) and that they have sexual dysfunctions (Tuerk, 1995). One mother I spoke to asked her gay son, "are you able to masturbate?" In talking with her son, she realized that having same-sex desire did not equate to sexual dysfunction. For parents, having the ability to separate myth from reality was an important step in understanding their children. In terms of learning about how their children felt about their own sexual identity, one mother asked her daughter, "are you mad that you are gay? Like, do you wish you were straight [heterosexual]?" The

daughter helped her mother understand how she felt about her own sexual identity, and how her mother should feel about it. In developing an awareness of the issues that their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children face, parents learned about societal discrimination, gay bashing, and the coming out process. This awareness was an important factor in understanding their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children.

Through acquiring accurate knowledge about homosexuality and bisexuality, distinguishing myth from reality, learning through their children about what their sexual identities meant to them, and developing an awareness of the issues and concerns of their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children, these parents began to understand the meaning behind having children who were gay, lesbian, and bisexual. Having this understanding helped them with the parallel process of moving towards acceptance of their children.

Acceptance. Parental acceptance meant embracing homosexuality and bisexuality in general and their children's sexual orientations specifically, without qualification or condition. Acceptance in its "purest" form allowed a parent to say, "I am proud of, and celebrate, the fact that my child is gay." Most parents did not achieve this level of acceptance.

There were multiple reasons underlying parental resistance to acceptance. First, some parents believed that their children's sexual identification was a phase. One mother I interviewed said, "I saw it [daughter's bisexuality] as sexual experimentation. And maybe even now I think that it is still [experimentation]." Second, many parents recognized the societal injustice towards gay, lesbian, and bisexual people and feared that their children would suffer. One mother commented that it was very hard to accept that



her daughter would be discriminated against. Third, some parents could not accept certain aspects of gay, lesbian, and bisexual culture. One mother said that she had no problem accepting that her son was gay, but the fact that he dressed in drag bothered her. In the interviews and PFLAG meetings, parents discussed and worked through the reasons behind their resistance to acceptance

In thinking about the interviews and listening to parents during PGLAG meetings, I developed a sense that understanding and acceptance did not always go hand in hand. Some parents understood homosexuality and bisexuality, and had the ability to differentiate between myth, stereotype, and reality, and still did not accept their children's sexual identities. Similarly, some parents accepted their children's sexuality wholeheartedly before understanding what the news really meant.

#### Understanding and Acceptance in Relation to Coming Out.

Moving toward understanding and acceptance of children who are gay, lesbian, and bisexual is similar to the process of "coming out of the closet" for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. Pearlman (1992) found that "children's self-disclosure initiates an identifiable sequence of stage-based reactions and behaviors, which closely parallels the identity formation process and experiences of lesbians and gay men" (p. 10). Other researchers have made reference to the process that parents go through as the parental process of coming out (Switzer, 1996; Boxer et al., 1991; Crosbie-Burnett, Foster, Murray, & Bowen, 1996; Mattison & McWhirter, 1995). I would be cautious, however, in using the "coming out" metaphor for the experiences of parents after finding out their

children are gay, lesbian, and bisexual because the term is so closely associated with being gay, lesbian, and bisexual that readers might interpret it as meaning that the parents are also coming out as gay, lesbian and bisexual. To avoid such confusion, I call the process that parents go through as moving toward understanding and acceptance.

Unlike Pearlman (1992), I found no linear, sequential, staged-based process by which parents understood and accepted their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. In fact, I would question the validity of any linear model that claims to represent the process by which parents understand and accept their children. As Martin (1991) states, “any model of the coming-out process is an oversimplification and may not accurately delineate the exact process for any one individual” (p. 161). The parental process of understanding and acceptance I found in the interview data and in the literature was complex, non-linear, and context specific. However, there are parallels between the experiences of these parents and the experiences of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people (see Table 1). These parallels suggest that parents can be adversely affected by societal homophobia, biphobia, and heterosexism in similar ways as gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. The experiences of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people I include in Table 1 have been cited in the literature. The experience of parents of gay, lesbian, and bisexual children in the same table have come from my research, and are explored in greater detail later in this chapter. There are important differences between the experiences of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people and parents (i.e., parents do not typically suffer from gay bashing, housing discrimination, and legal battles for gay marriage) that become hidden by making these parallels.

The parents in my study quickly became aware that, even as heterosexuals, they

Table 1

**Parallel Experiences Between Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual People and Their Parents**

Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual	Parents
Awareness of same sex attraction (Pearlman, 1992)	Finding out about child's sexual identity
Reacting emotionally to the awareness of same sex attraction (Strommen 1990)	Reacting emotionally to finding out that their children are gay, lesbian, and bisexual
Hiding sexual identity from acquaintances, friends, and family (Penn, 1997)	Hiding their children's sexual identities from acquaintances, friends, and family
Feeling alienated from friends and family (Health Canada, 1996)	Feeling alienated from friends and family
Coming out to friends and family (Strommen, 1989)	Telling friends and family
Grieving the loss of potential family and children (Thompson, 1992)	Grieving the loss of potential grandchildren
Being discriminated against (Mattison & McWhirter, 1995)	Feeling hurt from discrimination against child
Meeting other gay, lesbian, and bisexual people (Kelly, 1998)	Meeting other parent who have gay, lesbian, and bisexual children, and meeting other gay, lesbian, and bisexual people
Taking pride in their identities (Kelly, 1998)	Taking pride in their children's identities

were subject to societal homophobia, biphobia, and heterosexism. Just as gay, lesbian, and bisexual people have to develop a new sense of identity when they come out, some parents I interviewed had to shift their perception of their place in society from the security of being a part of the mainstream, “normal” culture, to being a part of the marginalized “abnormal.” When they became aware that they were different from parents of heterosexual children, they developed thoughts and strategies similar to ones used by gay, lesbian, and bisexual people to cope in a homophobic society. For example, they sought out people who they expected would be understanding and told them about their children. They also avoided people who were particularly vocal in their homophobia. Other parallel experiences included feeling uncomfortable in interacting with heterosexual friends and family members, hiding their children's sexual identities, grieving the loss of marriage and grandchildren, and eventually accepting their children's sexual identities. All of these experiences are described later in this chapter, and some are analyzed in detail in chapter five.

#### Main Themes That Emerged From the Interview data

In moving toward understanding and acceptance of their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children, parents expressed four main themes during the interviews (see Table 2). First, parents reflected on the relationship they had with their children before they knew their children were gay, lesbian, and bisexual. These reflections helped them resolve unanswered questions from the past and allowed them to make sense of the past feeling that their children were somehow different from other children. Second, parents reacted

**Table 2**  
**Themes That Emerged From the Interviews**

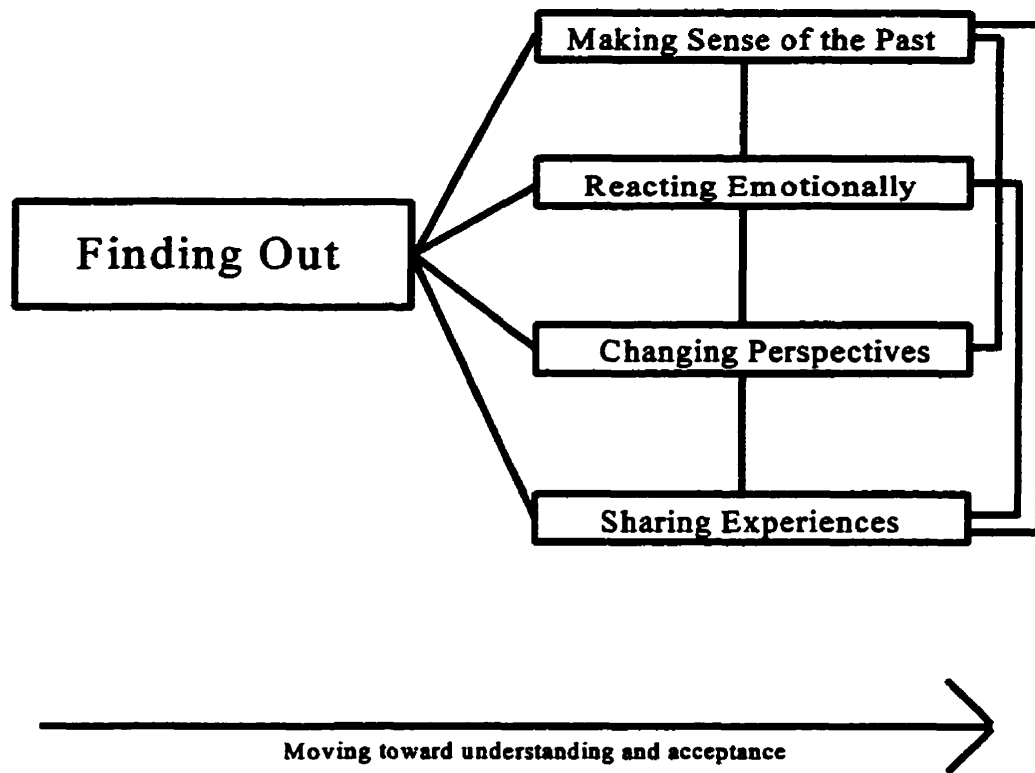
Theme	Category
Making sense of the past	Answering unresolved questioned Sensing that their children were different
Reacting emotionally	Guilt Worry Shock Relief Closeness Alienation Protection Grief Pain Sadness Jealousy Depression Denial Anger Feeling victimized Discomfort
Changing perspectives	Thinking about homosexuality Spiritual and religious change Becoming more accepting of diversity Self-evaluation
Sharing experiences	Telling others Seeking professional advice Seeking support from friends and family Providing support Speaking out against homophobia

emotionally to finding out they had gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. These emotions included guilt, worry, shock, relief, closeness, alienation, protection, grief, pain, sadness, jealousy, depression, denial, anger, feeling victimized, and discomfort. Third, parents developed new perspectives on homosexuality and bisexuality, spirituality and religion, societal diversity, and themselves as parents and sexual beings. Fourth, parents shared their experiences by telling others; seeking professional help; seeking social support from friends, family, and community; providing support; and speaking out against homophobia.

Figure 1 conceptually models the findings. The four themes are linked to each other by lines representing their interconnectedness, but they are not presented in chronological order because parents experiences were complex and non-linear.

To exemplify the interconnected, complex nature of the themes, I present the following scenario of a parent's experience, which is a composite experience I created by taking parts of different interviews to form a typical scenario of a parent who found out that his or her child is gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Although the scenario does not capture all the experiences of the parents I interviewed, it demonstrates that I could not categorize parents' experiences in a linear, stage-based model that depicted their movement toward understanding and acceptance.

A mother is informed by her son that he is gay, she simultaneously feels shock, worry, and sadness. Soon after, she shares her experience with her sister, who makes her feel guilty by suggesting that she must have raised her son improperly and should have his hormones checked. Feeling angry about the conversation with her sister, she



**Figure 1.** Conceptual model of how parents move toward understanding and acceptance of their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children.

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unsuccessfully thinks back to before she knew her son was gay to determine where she went wrong in raising her son. She remembers past events that now, for the first time, begin to make sense. She takes comfort in the thought that her son does not have to keep his sexual identity a secret anymore; nevertheless, she still struggles with accepting homosexuality. A few weeks after finding out, she attends a PFLAG meeting and listens to other parents talk about experiences with their children's coming out. Over the months and years, she revises her views on homosexuality, starts accepting the fact that her son is gay and changes her perspectives on many relevant issues. Still, part of her feels sad and worried for her son, just as she did initially.

As this scenario demonstrates, the experiences of the parents I interviewed were comprised of thoughts, emotions, and actions that were interconnected and complex. Some emotions were transient while others (e.g., this woman's sadness and worry) were long-term. In the remainder of this chapter, I provide a detailed look at each theme presented in the model.

### Finding Out

All parents recalled a point in time when their children came out to them. Six children came out to their parents in person, three in letters, two over the phone, and one in a home video. Some parents found out rather casually that their children were gay, lesbian, and bisexual. One father recalled, "it was really sudden, we were just driving in the car and he said, 'you know, Dad, I'm gay.' and I said, 'Oh, that's news to me.'" For other parents, their children's coming out was a very formal event.



All that weekend, Gail was telling me that she had something very important that she was doing. She was making a movie for her father and I to see. And I remember thinking, "Geez, I wonder what is on it. [On] Saturday night, she purposely got dressed up very feminine. She put a skirt on, and she put a nice blouse on...and we sat and watched this movie, which was about her life. And then [the movie] came to a point where she said "these are all the reasons you were so proud, and I hope you'll still love me when I tell you I'm gay."

Before the coming out, most parents did not know that their children were gay, lesbian, and bisexual, but a few did manage to figure it out beforehand. One father commented, "well, he actually told me but there were preliminaries for a year before that. In my heart I already knew, which made the actual conversation much easier." Another mother said,

It was a little over a year ago when he said to me, "Mom, I have something to tell you." Well, he didn't have anything to tell me. I had already put two and two together and came up with three.

Some parents said that they knew something was concerning their children, but they did not know what it was. "For about three or four days I knew he was going to tell me something, and I knew it was going to be fairly traumatic but [his being gay] didn't ever occur to me at all." One set of parents said they had to bring it up in the form of a question,

We were picking up that he was kind of depressed and he wasn't getting his work [done] at school. So one night we [asked him], "is something bothering you?" and he said, "yes, as a matter of fact something is." So we kind of played a little guessing game: "Are you worried about school?" "No." We went through all those options and at the very end, I said, "do you think you're gay?" and he said, "yes."

During the interviews, some parents compared finding out that their children were gay, lesbian, and bisexual, to other events in their lives. Some said that they had never experienced something comparable to this, whereas others said that the intensity of emotion felt after finding out about their children was comparable to other life events.

It was one of the most significant events in our lives.

I've never gone through anything like this before.

[It could compare to] the death of my parents. But I mean even that is a natural course of events. You know, you grow up, your parents get old, they die. This is sort of more out of the ordinary.

It's definitely not a frequent experience.

There was nothing in my life so personal that had that kind of an affect on me except the loss of my mother and my sister.

Finding out that their children were gay, lesbian, and bisexual was a significant event in many of these parents lives. Most found out through conversations with their children, although some found out beforehand. After finding out, parents made sense of the past, they reacted emotionally, they changed their perspectives, and they shared their experiences.

### Making Sense of the Past

After finding out that their children were gay, lesbian, and bisexual, most parents reflected on past events in their children's lives. They were able to answer unresolved questions from the past, and they made sense of the past thought that their children were somehow different.

Answering unresolved questions. Parents used this new information about their children to answer unresolved questions about their children's past activities and behaviors.

I knew that he had activities but I didn't know what they were. In fact, he had been going on trips and I didn't quite understand what the trips were about. I now understand [that] he would try to touch base with gay and lesbian people there and

invariably succeed.

This [his son being gay] actually explained a great many things,...very difficult times which I didn't appreciate. We [parents] were puzzled why he would be very moody. Obviously he had something to tell us that he wasn't telling us, which, at that stage, I had no idea what it was. So it [his coming out] explained many years of some unhappiness.

One mother said that finding out that her son was gay helped her resolve questions of her own behavior.

I remember one time I went up to his room and he had this poster of Chris Issac. He's a male singer. I remember when I looked at the poster, there was this feeling of rage that went through me. I felt like ripping it down off the wall, but I didn't have any reason why.... I just said to myself, "well, that is ridiculous." But then later on, when I found out, I felt like I must have sensed something.

Another mother had a bisexual daughter who was married to a bisexual man. She said she was able to interpret their marriage better with the knowledge that they were both bisexual.

The way that the relationship with her husband got going...started to make much more sense when I knew particularly that he was bisexual too. It helped make sense about why certain things were going on or happened.

Sensing that their children were different. Although most parents did not suspect that their children were gay, lesbian, and bisexual before they came out, many parents felt that their children were different from most other children.

There was something there and I could never put my finger on it, but I always kind of knew there was something different about her.

We always talked about Jerry marching to a different drummer.

Well, I always knew that he was different.

I always thought Peter was such a loving, kind boy. Yes, I knew he was different but I was hoping it was just because he was caring and considerate. Little did I realize it was being gay that made him this considerate and understanding and

loving.

I guess I must have at least subconsciously felt that maybe he was [gay]. But I don't know why.

### Reacting Emotionally

All parents reacted emotionally to their children's coming out; however, emotions varied significantly from parent to parent in terms of type, intensity, duration, and order. For instance, parents often felt multiple emotions at once, or felt an emotion once and experienced it again at a later date. Some emotions lasted a few moments while others lasted years. In light of the complex nature of parents' emotions, the order in which I present them is from more common to less common.

Guilt. Guilt was a very common emotion expressed by parents. Many parents wondered if they had done something to cause their children to become gay, lesbian, and bisexual. One mother thought that her son might have become gay because she was not a particularly feminine woman, while another thought that her daughter might be lesbian because she instilled a strong feminist ethic in her.

I like sports and I was always a tom boy.... I had spent a good amount of my life having people looking at me...and making remarks. And I have always had concerns that maybe I'm not as feminine as you are supposed to be. [I felt] in some way I might have [caused it].... You know, what you read in the books about...I mean there was that...dominant, overbearing mother [theory].

I always, always impressed on both of my girls never to let a man push [them] around. "You are as smart as any man. You can do anything a man can do." You know, I always pushed those issues. And then I thought, "oh, did I go overboard?"

Other mothers felt that they were biologically or genetically responsible for the sexual orientation of their children.

When I was pregnant with Sherry, I hemorrhaged in my fourth month. Was a part

of her being formed at that time and, because I hemorrhaged, it didn't get formed right? She was born seven weeks early. I was like, "uh, oh, is this because she was born early?" I mean all those would have been my fault and I had a lot of guilt about that.

Alex was born with an undescended testicle and later on he had a hernia on the other side.... And I can't say that didn't bother me either, always wondering, "well, is it [his sexual orientation] because...."

At the [PFLAG] meeting the other day when Vickie brought up that it's the mothers that have the extra chromosome, I said, "oh my God, it is [emphasis added] our fault." You know, that made me feel real good [guilty] again. So it was my fault that he's gay?

One mother also felt that perhaps her desire to have a girl instead of a boy caused her son to be gay: "I had wanted a little girl so badly and all my thoughts were little girl's thoughts for this baby. I mean, if no one really knows, then could that have contributed? I still wonder." Another expressed guilt about having heterosexual privilege that her lesbian daughter did not have.

I went through an awful guilt trip because it made me feel bad that I was accepted in anything I wanted to do and Mary wouldn't be. And I can remember going to a dance at Christmas time, I guess, the same year Mary came out. My husband and I were up dancing, and I remember I just wanted to leave and just never go to a dance again. I just felt so bad. And afterwards we were talking about it, and he said, "why did you feel bad?" I said, "because Mary couldn't do what we did. She just couldn't get up and dance with her partner, and waltz and carry on and kiss her if she wanted to. And I can do that." It really, really bothers me.... Like what makes me any better than her?

One father felt guilty about listening to, and laughing at, gay jokes that were told in front of his son in the past. "I guess the first reaction was, 'did I tell any [gay] jokes in the past?' I know that I have laughed at those jokes in the past.... Does he think I'm a jerk?" Another father felt guilty for not being more active in helping other parents of gay,

lesbian and bisexual children.

I think a part of it would be people like myself coming out and being more outspoken in trying to help people in the same situation. But I'm not sure I'm ready. I feel quite guilty there. Have I done what I can? I haven't.

Guilt was one of the most common reactions for parents after finding out their children were gay, lesbian, and bisexual. The reasons parents felt guilty ranged from wondering if they caused their children to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual, to being homophobic and not being politically active in the fight for equality for their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children.

Worry. Worry was another very common parental reaction to their children's self-disclosure. Parents worried that their children would not be accepted in society or in the family, that their children would not be safe, that the quality of their children's lives would be compromised, and that people would find out that they were the parents of gay, lesbian, and bisexual children.

The hardest thing for me was the fact that I knew not everyone was going to accept her, and that is very, very difficult. And I still struggle with that.

Well, I mean I am always worried that society will never accept it, that he's going to be discriminated against, people are going to be laughing at him.

I wish he would tone it [his effeminacy] down a little bit just so he doesn't get his head kicked in going down the street some day.

I guess my reaction was to be really worried about him. Not so much that he would get beat up but what his life would be like.

I was horrified initially that somebody in my family, somebody that I loved so much would be in what I would consider such a negative position.

I was afraid people were going to find out.

At the back of my mind, I'm waiting for the call. It's like when your children are

out at night, and you're not quite sure how they are getting on or what is happening.... I think you are slightly frightened for your children at the best of times. And I think this [being gay] is just perhaps one step more because it's just one more thing that you kind of don't need.

Worry was an emotion that lasted for a long time. Its permanency is due to the fact that there is always the threat of violence, rejection, and discrimination towards gays.

Parents worried for their children's safety because of the homophobic violence and gay bashing of which they were aware. They also worried about discrimination towards their children, and that other people would find out that they had gay, lesbian, and bisexual children.

Shock. Many parents were shocked to find out that their children were gay, lesbian, and bisexual. Shock was expressed as a physiological response: "We were kind of in shock." It also meant being caught off guard: "He sent me and his father a letter telling us that he was gay, which was quite a shock." Parents felt shock when they never suspected that their children were gay, lesbian, and bisexual. "I didn't expect it at all. I was completely and totally shocked." Shock was often a short-lived emotion, usually lasting anywhere from a few minutes to a few days.

Relief. Some parents felt relieved after their children came out to them. Relief was often felt when parents' suspicions that their children might be gay, lesbian and bisexual were finally confirmed. One father commented that "it's like a great weight has disappeared.... Now we're just back to normal. Things were just not quite right for a few years. It was a relief [to find out]. One father said that the initial shock was so awful that it was a relief to overcome it. "By the third day [of] feeling really low and awful...it was

like a veil lifted...and I felt tremendous relief.”

**Closeness.** Many parents felt closer to their children after finding out that they were gay, lesbian, and bisexual.

It's [our relationship] getting closer, I think. We're now back to being open and loving and caring for one another...it's improved.

Really, it was like regaining my son again because now suddenly we talked to each other. There was nothing withheld. And all these years, I didn't know what it was that he was active in.

I think, if it's possible, we might even be closer now. We were always very, very, very close. And I think that is what hurt me so much, because I didn't know and we were so close. And I knew everything about her except for that.

I felt I had really lost her [bisexual daughter] after this relationship with Donald [daughter's husband] started. I mean there were some pretty strange stuff happening from my perspective. And she and I had been pretty connected for many years. So it was like once she told us that [she was bisexual], there was a chance to feel a bit better connected again.

I think it's [our relationship] improved, and I think it's closer. We'll talk now [whereas] we didn't talk about homosexuality [when he was] a young kid, not in any detail like it has been [since he came out].

Closeness was felt by parents after they found out because they were able to then talk about important aspects of their children's lives. The sense that their children were distancing themselves was replaced by the opportunity to reconnect with their children.

**Alienation.** In contrast to the closeness many parents felt, one father felt alienated from his son because he felt his gay son was different from him in a way that he would never truly understand.

At the center of it is a certain alienation. My son is different from me. He's not doing what I was hoping he would be doing. I'll probably never understand him quite completely because he's different.... The very important aspect of sexuality is just foreign. I know how heterosexual males feel. I assume they have sexual feelings like myself. I try to understand how women feel. I can never understand



that thoroughly. That is just in the nature of things. But a homosexual male, it's very difficult to understand. [I] have to try to understand but it's not that easy.

**Protection.** A few parents felt protective of their children after they found out. One mother wanted to reassure her son that he would be safe with her and her husband. "My immediate reaction was to protect him, to reassure him that it did not make any difference about how we felt about him." Another mother wanted to protect her family and herself from the societal discrimination and harassment towards gays, lesbians, and bisexuals.

I had this incredible crave to protect her. I didn't want [my husband] or my other daughter to go out. I just wanted us to all stay right here then nobody could hurt her. Nobody would ever have to know, because I felt I could never, ever, ever tell anybody. It was this terrible secret that I had to carry around for the rest of my life, is what I thought.

**Grief.** Grief was expressed by a few parents after their children came out. They said it felt like their child or another close family member had died. One father commented, "it sounds ridiculous now but at the time it was like somebody really close to you had died." Another mother said, "it was like Kelly had died." Parents felt that their children were suddenly foreign to them, that they did not know them anymore, and that the person they once knew was gone, and was replaced by this new gay, lesbian, or bisexual person. Parents also grieved the loss of heterosexual marriage and grandchildren. As one father described the loss as follows: "At the time I felt like my world had come to an end."

**Pain.** One father was uncomfortable with trying to recall initial thoughts and feelings he had towards his gay son, but he described pain as a prominent feeling.

I think this [son coming out] is so removed [from my mind] that I don't trust myself in going over the stages correctly. I no longer remember it. Maybe some things I try to forget but I remember it was very painful at the beginning and the

pain sort of settled. Now there is still a kind of disappointment, a kind of pain back there. I certainly try not to show it to my son, but the pain still remains.

The expression of pain is a combination of many emotions (e.g., sadness, grief, and anger) that accumulate and contribute to a general sense of feeling pain. It was this pain that makes talking about this issue difficult for this father.

Sadness. Parents felt sad when they learned that their children were gay, lesbian, and bisexual. One father felt sad because he thought he would not have grandchildren. "I felt that there was a loss in terms of grandchildren. Another father said that sadness was and still is a prominent emotion because he feels that his son will have a difficult life.

I think I was sad. Not in the sense of "oh my God, my son is a homosexual," but in the sense that life is tough enough without having that additional burden and all the problems that go with it to carry with you.... And now that everything is out in the open, I still feel that it is [sad].

Like many emotions, sadness comes and goes even when parents see their children well-adjusted and content, because there is always the possibility that homophobic discrimination could adversely affect their children.

Jealousy. One mother felt jealous of other parents who had heterosexual children.

[I was] jealous of anyone who had a straight child. And my niece lives with us, and she is my daughters age, and of course, she is straight. And that summer boys would come to the house to call for her. I was so envious that my sister...could have a straight child and mine was gay. Like I was so jealous of that. And then after awhile I told myself, "my God, smarten up. You [also] have a straight child. Do you hate yourself?"

Depression. One mother felt depressed after finding out her daughter was a lesbian.

I would say for the first six to nine months I think I was in a daze. I think I went through a type of depression. I'm not really sure because I've never gone through anything like that before. I didn't want to do anything. I couldn't concentrate on

anything. All I ever wanted to do was sleep but then I couldn't stay asleep. I was really a wreck...every time I was around her, I just cried. Every time she saw me, I cried.

Denial. One mother was in denial initially after her daughter came out to her.

I remember sitting up and screaming, "no, Rhonda, you're not gay! You're confused. You're shy. The boys don't call you because they don't know what a nice person you are!" And I kept saying, "once they know, you'll have lots of dates." And she kept saying, "no, mom. no, mom, that's not it." And I said, "oh, yes, honey. You're not gay, you're just shy. You're going to be okay."

Another mother had difficulty understanding that her daughter identified as bisexual because, in her mind, bisexuality did not exist.

No, I still saw it [her bisexuality] more as sexual experimentation. And maybe even now I think that I feel it's still part of it.

Anger. A few parents said that anger was a strong emotion for them. One father said that he felt angry at heterosexual couples for having the privilege of being capable of holding hands in public.

I felt angry. I remember getting on a bus and going to work and seeing young couples, teenagers 15 and 16, holding hands and [I] felt angry and annoyed with them for having that heterosexual relationship.

One mother felt angry at her son for coming out to her in a letter instead of in person.

[I] of course, did a lot of crying but only [because] I found out he was gay through the letter.... I thought we had a very good relationship so that is what, number one, made me angry--that he told me in the letter and not by himself.

Feeling victimized. One father felt victimized by the fact that his son was gay.

[I felt like] a victim...worrying about me and my own feeling about that. I felt like there was a loss that I had.

Discomfort. Some parents expressed feeling uncomfortable around their effeminate sons.

And being very honest, I do have a problem with them. I don't know how to deal with people that are, like I said, blatantly.... I talk to them and I socialize with them but I can't say I'm comfortable around them.

Well, he likes to dress in drag for drag shows once in a while. That upsets me. I am not comfortable seeing him in ladies' clothes. Although I must say he makes a lovely looking lady.

After finding out, parents expressed a wide variety of emotional reactions. Some lasted for a few moments, whereas many have stayed with them for years. For these parents, reacting emotionally to the news, and resolving those emotions were important steps in the process of understanding and accepting their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. Along with reacting emotionally, parents reflected upon having gay, lesbian, and bisexual children and changed their perspective on related issues.

### Changing Perspective

In moving toward understanding and acceptance of their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children, parents made significant changes in their thinking. For some, perspective change was necessary in order to accept and embrace their children. For others, having their children come out to them reinforced perspectives they held already. Parents' understanding and acceptance was aided by thinking about homosexuality, spiritual and religious change, becoming more accepting of societal diversity, and evaluating themselves.

Thinking about homosexuality. Many parents developed new perspectives of homosexuality. Some had enlightening conversations with their children about being gay, lesbian, and bisexual. These conversations often cleared up confusion and questions

parents had and enabled them to understand how their children saw themselves as gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. One mother said it was helpful to hear that her daughter was happy to be a lesbian. Another mother said that it helped to realize that her son had many of the same concerns she did regarding being gay. Other parents took comfort in the thought that their children did not choose to be gay, but were born that way.

I remember asking her, "do you wish you were straight? Like are you mad that you are gay? Like do you want to be straight?" And she said, "no, I don't ever want to be straight. I'm not straight and I don't want to be." And that kind of helped me. I was angry a little bit that she would say such a thing. Like, "how could you ever not want to be straight?" But it made me feel better to think that she wasn't at least agonizing over the fact that her sister was straight and she wasn't, and her cousins are all straight and she's not. So that helped.

In the beginning it was quite interesting because we [me and my gay son] had talks about if he brought a boy home and they were kind of sitting holding hands or whatever. And I said "I think I would find that strange because I am not used to seeing that." And he said, "well, I would find it strange too." And that really made me think because although you have discovered that you are gay, you have still been brought up in a certain way in society. So it's just as weird to you even though you might like it, and going really against what you have been brought up as.

Robert made me realize...that to be gay, you are born that way. It's not something you choose. And as Robert had told me, "why would I have chosen a way of life that is ridiculed or frowned upon?" You know, he said, "people wouldn't choose that kind of life if they had to."

One of the things to learn is that this matter of sexuality is a given. It just appears when one becomes of age, one just becomes oriented this way or that way. Nothing can be done and nothing should be done about it.... In our family, if it's my son that is going to be [gay] then so be it.

As soon as I began to think about it, I understood that gays and lesbians would simply not be with us at all if they didn't make a positive contribution to the groups that they belonged [to]...that is the kind of thing that helped me along. Gays and lesbians are clearly useful members of our society. By just looking around, I realize how many there are in important places in literature and arts, in performing arts most visibly. I've come to appreciate this but I still have not studied the matter thoroughly.

One mother realized that being a lesbian is not such a bad thing when you compare it to other situations, in which people find themselves. A father thought about how his gay son was different from other people, and realized that his son was not any different.

I remember when Tracy first came out, she was working...and she would call me at work, and she would say, "Mom, how do you spell Truro?" or, "where is Middleton?" You know, some silly little question. And I would hang up the phone and say, "oh thank God she is still here. She can still call me." And I used to think, "what if I didn't have her?" What if she couldn't deal with it herself and she did something?... Or, you know, we have friends that lost a daughter in a car accident. What if she was dead? Like what if she got hit by a car? She is gay, yes... and then I started thinking to myself, 'get over it. Like she is still here.' Once I started thinking about putting things in perspective like that I think it really helped me.

Yes, I guess I try to think, "now, how is he different from anybody else?" He is not different from anybody else. He is just like anybody else.

Thinking about homosexuality helped these parents in their move towards understanding what homosexuality is, and what it means to their children. Thinking about their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children also helped them put things in perspective and realize that worse things could happen than finding out one has a gay, lesbian, or bisexual child.

Spiritual and religious changes. Some parents changed significantly in terms of spirituality and religion after their children came out to them. One mother abandoned her church and another mother became very angry with God and lost faith. Some parents who were not religious thought that having a gay son helped them reify their negative view of organized religion

[My lesbian daughter] was a religion teacher, Eucharistic minister, and alter server. You know, we were very involved. And now that she is not accepted in my church, I am very angry and I haven't been there for, I would say, close to a year

now I guess.

I became quite angry with God. I stopped believing any more or going to church.... I lost faith. I blame the Lord very much because, as I say, he knew I wanted a daughter so bad and yet he gave me a son but he gave me a gay son. Why could he not change this? Why couldn't he have given me another daughter instead of a gay son? To me, he could have done something about it, which I know again is stupid when I stop and think of reality. But at the time, I guess the Lord was the punching bag and it was easier to blame somebody. You know, you get anger and frustrations out.

And luckily I'm not religious so that made it even easier.

I dismissed religion a long time ago. This [son coming out] just reinforced for me all the negative thoughts I had about religion anyway. Now I have even more ammunition to criticize them. We [she and her husband] were both brought up Catholic, and long before this I had decided that wasn't very relevant to me.

One father said that after his son came out to him, his spiritual health improved as he became more comfortable with himself.

I would say probably it improved, at least in terms of spiritual health. I think by having a better comfort about yourself and your self image.... I think that gives you a better sense of well-being. I think for me personally.

Becoming more accepting of societal diversity. Some parents said because they had gay children, they became more accepting of other minority groups.

And also it extends your understanding to other minorities too, like Jewish people. When I think about other minority groups, I don't think that I had a good sense of what the suffering is from the minorities' perspective until I had the experience with Carl. And not so much him, but listening to how other people express their homophobic ideas and how that makes you feel. You know, you feel much more empathy to a minority group. When you hear people like Rosanne Skokes<sup>2</sup>, it tended to galvanize, I think, a lot of my anger at the majority of people expressing profound attitudes towards minority groups, and to just feel the injustice of that.

I guess the only way it affected me as a person.... I think it has helped me to be

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<sup>2</sup>Rosanne Skokes is a former Nova Scotia member of Parliament who spoke out against gay-positive legislation.

sort of a more tolerant person. I guess I always thought I was but I was never really faced with any of the hard issues of being one of the majority group here. I had done the women's movement thing, and I think I was kind of into that. [But] I never felt personally discriminated against as a woman in any significant way. In small ways but never any great way. So I think I was faced with that issue of what it is like to be discriminated against, not me personally but [my gay son].

One father said that by being Jewish he sees society differently from most people, and having a gay son has reinforced his philosophy that society should promote differences.

I see society a little differently...from most people because I happen to be Jewish, and that is a group that has been persecuted. I, myself, suffered direct persecution and a great deal of it. So I feel society should promote all the wonderful differences, different groups that we have. Well, I simply added to my list, gays and lesbians to all the other oppressed and repressed groups.

Evaluating themselves. Having their children come out to them allowed some parents to evaluate themselves, their role as parents, and their own sexual identity. One father discussed how having a daughter who identifies as bisexual gave him the opportunity to think about his own sexuality. Another father said that having a gay son challenged him to confront his homophobia. Another father said that dealing with the issue of having a bisexual daughter has made him feel like a good parent.

Penny coming out certainly gave me an opportunity to think about my own sexual orientation and that whole idea of the continuum and at certain times in your life, you may identify yourself more to be one orientation than another.... For most of my adult life I have had a sense of human sexuality, human nature being essentially bisexual. Not just the Kinsey statistics but a sense that it is pretty normal. Especially at different stages in your life, there is an attraction to same sex as well as the other sex, and having experienced my own sexuality as having some parts of attraction to men. But that never came anywhere near a life style choice. There was a point in my life when I was really quite confused and didn't know what it would mean to me, what my maleness would be about, what it would mean to live a life as a man, what kind of values. So this experience [daughter coming out] for me really was a grand opportunity to rethink all of that and to re-experience where I am now.

I always thought of myself as not being particularly homophobic relative to a lot



of other males that I know. But when it was my own son, I realized there were areas that I had that were homophobic as well. He helped me, I think, get over more of that stuff that was still there. So even though I thought that I was fairly liberated, I think there was still a level of homophobia that was operating that I realized once it really stared me in the face that intimately. I think that I felt more comfortable with myself after I came to grips with my own feelings about it. I feel that I am more sensitive to mankind. And I think also all the homophobia and the stereotypes, the rigid male, masculine stereotypes that I think we grew up with in culture, that the heterosexual male grows up with in culture, that you don't realize how much it controls your own behavior. I think that I felt a lessening of that control on my behavior after going through that. So not as much a need to be hyper-masculine.

That makes me feel good as a parent. It makes me feel, I think, very active as a parent. Like I said, I don't think that this is a story that won't have its twists and turns and surprises. And I think I'll be there as a parent. There is none of that, "what did I do wrong?"

In evaluating themselves, many parents realized that they were marginalized because of the stigma attached to homosexuality and bisexuality. Some parents changed their perspective on their position in society. One mother felt that she was not a part of the gay community.

I tell people I'm in the gay community. I mean it's a part of my life now so I'm really in tune to what is going on and things like that. I mean before if there was a gay issue in the newspaper, I didn't bother to read it. Why would I? You know, it didn't affect me.

One father commented on how his perspective changed when he became involved with gay issues: "Our first pride march was interesting. We didn't march but we went down...to the waterfront and met them when they came in. It changes your whole perspective when it involves you personally."

After finding out about their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children, these parents changed their perspectives on some issues, including homosexuality and religion. They became more accepting of diversity and they also felt that it gave them an opportunity to

think about themselves as parents, and as sexual beings. Some parents also changed their perspective on their position in society, and felt like members of the gay, lesbian, and bisexual community. Changing their perspectives was important in moving towards understanding and accepting. Many parents shared their thoughts, feelings, and their changing perspectives with others.

### Sharing Experiences

In the process of understanding and accepting their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children, parents shared their experiences of having gay, lesbian, and bisexual children with others. Many parents had to confront their concerns about telling other people that they were parents of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. Some sought professional help as well as social support from friends and family. Once they reached a certain level of comfort, they spoke out against homophobia, took interest in gay issues, and provided support for others who were still struggling.

Telling other people. Many parents expressed their concerns about telling other people that they are parents of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. Some parents wondered what people would think of them, others were more concerned about hurting their children by telling others. Parents often felt like they were in the closet.

I was in the closet. Oh, and I locked the door.... I just felt I could never ever tell anybody....

I'll always be coming out. You know, there will always be people that I will have to say, "I have a gay daughter."

Since my son came out to me, I've joined him in the closet because there are very few friends with whom we have confided.

[I'm] constantly judging other people's reactions. I mean I'm making a decision--do I tell him or not?

Here I am quite unable to tell many of my friends some aspects of my son's life. It's really on my wishes. He doesn't live here. He lives very far away so he doesn't really care one way or another. But I don't want to get him out of the closet.... So when we go to a PFLAG meeting, I don't tell my friends where it is we're going on those Sundays. When we meet our PFLAG friends in a restaurant, our friend asks me, "how do you know those people?" and I don't tell them.

I don't think I would have difficulty talking about it but I do think that I respect some boundaries around [my son's] privacy. And I think that if I went around talking about that, I would feel that I'm violating some of his privacy. Why should I be doing that? I wouldn't be talking about my other son's or my daughter's sexual history, why should I do that with him?

Another mother explained that her decision not to tell others was due partly because she did not know who her bisexual daughter wanted to know and felt the need to protect herself from adverse reactions.

I think partly that is because I don't know who Kerry wants to know. But part of it, there has been a bit of self-protection. Probably a bit of how will people react, what will people make of it? Especially when I told these few close friends that and had at least one person who had quite a negative reaction, which surprised me.

Telling others that their children were gay, lesbian, and bisexual was difficult for these parents because it meant admitting they had gay, lesbian, and bisexual children; outing their children without their children's consent; and feeling vulnerable to prejudice and discrimination from friends if they found out about their children. However, telling others was an important step in accepting their children.

Seeking professional advice. Many parents turned to health professionals for advice on who they should talk to and what they should do concerning their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. Some were not satisfied with the way their family physicians dealt

with the matter. Others went to see physicians, social workers, and therapists and found them to be very helpful.

I had asked my doctor [for references], and she didn't give me any names...she was receptive to the point of she told me it [being gay] was life.... I would have liked to have had a more open talk with her. But yet I didn't know how to approach it either.

My family doctor wasn't any good at all. He didn't give me any advice. He didn't offer to send me to talk to anybody. He didn't tell me where to get any literature. He just said there was nothing I had done, and she couldn't be changed. That was it. And he more or less laughed. He told me to come back to see him in 10 days, and I remember leaving thinking, "ten days? What is that going to do?" So I haven't gone. I've changed doctors. I've never gone back to him. If he doesn't accept gay people, that is his own personal opinion. But as my medical physician, he should have offered for me to go talk to somebody.

And I did talk to a social worker and I got some information over the phone. I found her really quite helpful and supportive through this. So I think that just that talking through may have been a bit of a help for me at that point.

The three professional people that we contacted--the social worker, the psychologist, and our family doctor--were all very helpful.

Support from friends and family. Many parents turned to friends and family for support after hearing the news that their children were gay, lesbian, and bisexual. Some parents said it was important to debrief to friends and family with whom they were close.

I told my sister because I mean I am very close to her and I needed to talk to somebody, and I knew she would be safe to talk to because she is a very accepting person. And she just loves Beverly to death so I knew she would be okay. And she was.

Yes. Oh, yes, it [debriefing with friends] was really important.... Partly it was just to fill them in, and partly to talk and have a friend say, "[that's] okay."

One mother said it was important for all of her extended family to know, and if they did not accept her lesbian daughter, she was willing to abandon them.

But I told everybody in my family, "either you accept [my lesbian daughter] or

you lose everybody." Like I would make no bones about it. I said, "if I ever hear any of you say anything or laugh at her or make fun of her, that will be it. You'll lose me, [and my husband and two kids]"

Some parents did not get the support they sought from friends and family. Other parents said that they were not out because their friends and family were homophobic.

I had a few close friends that I told. I got some very stereotyped responses to the bisexuality...that you frequent partner hop, have two partners at the same time, and sit on the fence. And just a very kind of negative response to bisexuality that I don't think would have been there if it had been gay or lesbian. And one of the people I talked to even had a gay colleague who had very negative views of bisexuality.

With friends and relatives...they don't know. And they are quite homophobic.

The hardest part has not been so much him telling me he's gay, as trying to figure out how to best deal with the rest of the family and people you know so that you're not hurting him. It's hard.

For many parents, receiving support from family and friends was important for their well-being. Some friends and family provided the support that these parents needed, however, many parents found their friends and family rather homophobic. For these parents, they had to find new friends and social support groups (e.g., PFLAG).

Providing support. Some parents were able to provide support for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, as well as their parents. Strategies for providing support included becoming more visible, and exchanging experiences and stories with other parents of gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. For example,

I was going along Spring Garden Road one day and I saw these rainbow earrings, the big hoops with the rainbows. And I thought, "I'm going to get those, and any time I go for a drive in the country or any rural area, I'm going to wear them. So that if I go in a store or if I go to a yard sale and there is some poor kid there, and they recognize the earrings, they'll think, 'oh, she looks normal. Maybe I'm okay.'"

I've been trying to help that fellow because he did not come, unlike myself, and

join PFLAG. He has not accepted his son's lifestyle at all And I've been trying to help him out but I haven't been able to get through.

Murray [gay son] used to get some of the boys he knew who were having trouble with families to talk to me just so that they knew that they could have families that accepted their gay children.

Parents who had adequate support and confidence were able to provide support to other gay, lesbian, and bisexual people and their parents. Some did this by being more visible, whereas others talked to those who were struggling. Along with providing support, many parents had the courage to speak out against homophobia.

Speaking out against homophobia. Many parents said that after they found out that their children were gay, lesbian, and bisexual, they spoke out against homophobia by confronting family member, friends, co-workers, and media persons who made homophobic comments. One father said that before he knew his son was gay, he would not challenge people who made homophobic remarks, but now he does. Another mother spoke out against the double standard her husband was operating on.

I used to let remarks go by without challenging them and now I challenge them every time. And it's quite interesting to see the reactions.

My husband got very upset about an incident that a friend and his [male] partner were coming to visit to our house. And my husband got uptight because I allowed them to share the same bedroom. I politely and bluntly said, "well, if he was bringing his girl to go to bed everything would be fine, wouldn't it?" And he said, "yes." I said, "well, what is the difference?" That is a double standard, and you can't have that. And even if Thomas [gay son] brought home a partner, would you say, "no, he's not going up to your bedroom?" Because if Dan [other son] brought home a girl the same night as Thomas brought home a male friend, Dan would be perfectly all right by screwing the ass off of a girl...but Thomas is wrong because he has a male partner? I said, "no, I don't live by those standards. What is good for one is good for the other." And I stood my ground and I allowed them to stay.

[A co-worker] said about working with a couple of lezzies, and I said, "well, they have to make a living too." Just a couple of times that I have made remarks like

that.

If I disagree with what they are saying then I'll say so. And I wouldn't have done that [before he found out he had a gay son]. I would have just kind of laughed along with it because it wasn't something that I was personally concerned with. So it was kind of acceptable humor. I guess because it now affects me personally, I'm much more conscious of it. I always challenge it when it comes up.

Parents who spoke out against homophobia were ones who had a fairly good understanding of homosexuality and were intolerant of ignorance and double standards. In speaking out, these parents took an active role to fight against prejudice and discrimination against gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. In moving towards understanding and acceptance, speaking out against homophobia required experiencing other thoughts, emotions, and most often occurred later in the move toward understanding and acceptance.

### Summary

In this chapter, I defined the concepts of understanding and acceptance in relation to having gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. I identified parallels between the experiences of parents I interviewed and documented experiences of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, to demonstrate how homophobia, biphobia, and heterosexism can affect these parents. As well, I provided a content analysis of the interview data. All parents found out at some point that their children were gay, lesbian, and bisexual. After finding out, parents made sense of the past, they reacted emotionally to the news, they changed their perspectives on many issues, and they shared their experiences with others. In the next chapter, I discuss the factors that influence parents' understanding and acceptance of

their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children.



## Chapter Five

### Factors that Influence Understanding and Acceptance

As shown in chapter four, many parents had to make significant life changes after finding out their children were gay, lesbian, and bisexual. In this chapter, I discuss why coming to terms was so difficult for these parents. In asking “why?”, I analyze factors that aid and hinder parents’ move toward understanding and acceptance of their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. These factors could be used by researchers, educators, health professionals, media personnel, parent support groups, and parents themselves, to create strategies (see chapter six) in helping parents who struggle to understand and accept their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children.

My analysis is divided into four main sections: society, community, family, and individual (see Table 3). At each of these levels, different factors have the ability to aid or hinder parental understanding and acceptance. My analysis of these factors is grounded in interview data, and is also informed by informal conversations I had with parents, observations I made at PFLAG meetings, information contained in the literature, and my personal experiences.

#### Societal-Level Factors

My sexual orientation has not been caused by you, nor is it designed to hurt you, nor should you or I do anything to try to change it. What is hurting you is the misinformation about homosexuality that you have been taught by society (Savin-Williams, 1996)

Table 3

**Factors at Four Levels That Influence Understanding and Acceptance**

<b>Level</b>	<b>Factor</b>
<b>Society</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mass Media</li> <li>Social Policy</li> </ul>
<b>Community</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Friends</li> <li>Workplace</li> <li>Religious groups</li> <li>Support groups</li> <li>Recreational clubs</li> </ul>
<b>Family</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family structure and dynamic</li> <li>Finding out in the context of intimacy versus privacy</li> <li>Homophobia from other family members</li> <li>Presence of other gay, lesbian, and bisexual family members</li> <li>Children's spouses and partners</li> </ul>
<b>Individual</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cognitive dissonance</li> <li>Willingness to learn</li> <li>Ability to shift identity</li> <li>Other experiences occurring at the time of finding out</li> <li>Past experiences involving gay, lesbian, and bisexual people</li> </ul>

Societal values and attitudes toward homosexuality influenced these parents' responses to their children's sexual orientations. Societal intolerance of homosexuality and bisexuality provided parents with a framework by which they formed their attitudes, values, and beliefs about gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. Understanding how this intolerance is justified and rationalized is an important step in analyzing the process of understanding and acceptance these parents went through after finding out their children are gay, lesbian, and bisexual.

A common justification for discriminating against gay, lesbian, and bisexual people is that they are unnatural because they are perceived as not reproducing. Societal constructions of homosexuality and bisexuality place them outside of marriage and family life. For example, gay men have been generally thought of as being asocial, solitary, and deviant "creatures." As Strommen (1990) remarked, "within the intimate confines of the family, homosexuality is seldom anticipated because societal prejudices lead family members to believe that those with whom they have close relationships cannot be gay" (p. 12). Another justification for discrimination stems from the stereotype that gay men are sexual predators and pedophiles. Intolerance of homosexuality is thus accepted under the guise of child and family safety. As one mother of a gay son said, "I asked him about safe sex as all my fears of other gay men taking advantage of my son surfaced" (Tuerk, 1995, p. 20). The concern she expressed for her son came from her perception that gay men were sexual molesters who practiced unsafe sex. She, like most, received her stereotypical images from two society-level factors that have traditionally been venues of homophobic, biphobic, and heterosexist expression: mass media and social policy.

**Mass Media. Mass media (e.g., film, television, and newspaper) reflect and stimulate current social attitudes, values, and beliefs. In western society, mass media have been successful in reflecting and promoting homophobic, biphobic and heterosexist attitudes. Homophobia and biphobia are expressed through the creation of gay, lesbian, and bisexual characters who have traits deemed unfavorable by societal standards. Heterosexism is expressed in film and television by creating scenes and settings in which all the characters are assumed to be heterosexual. The difficulty some parents I interviewed had in understanding and accepting their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children stemmed, in part, from three psychological barriers created by homophobia, biphobia, and heterosexism in the media.**

First, they feared that their children would look like gay, lesbian, and bisexual stereotypes created in the media. One mother I interviewed commented, “when Sarah came out, I just had this terrible stereotype of, you know, work boots, the big hunting jackets.” Another mother recalled, “I expected him to look like all of my fears and stereotypes of gays...a man dressed in women’s clothes or someone wearing black leather, thigh-high boots and earrings” (Tuerk, 1995, p. 20). It is not these gender bending images per se that are negative, but the cultural meaning attached to them. Because culture has created distinct, mutually exclusive roles for men and women, individuals who challenge these roles (e.g., gays, lesbians, and bisexuals) are considered deviant. This deviancy is “celebrated” in mass media, which has traditionally presented uni-dimensional images of lesbians as tough manly woman, and gay men as men who want to be women or wear women’s clothing. While there is nothing wrong in portraying these images in mass

media, what is unacceptable is the lack, therein, of diverse representation of gays and lesbians<sup>3</sup>. Having diverse representation is important because stereotypes made understanding and acceptance difficult, particularly for parents of gay children who do not fit media stereotypes. One mother commented,

my ideas of homosexuality were based on old movies and TV shows. Those images were of feminine males. My son is very masculine, so it was hard to believe he was gay. Since then I've gotten quite an education (Boxer et al., 1991).

The discordance between the image she had of her son and the image she had of gay men from mass media made it difficult for this mother to believe her son was gay.

Second, parents had media-induced fears that gay, lesbian, and bisexual people lead unhealthy and unhappy lives. Parents developed the sense that they are a troubled group of people who need serious help. One mother stated,

if anyone had asked me, "do you think she is gay?" I would have said, "no, she has got lots of gay friends and she's just helping them cope with it. She is not gay." That is what I would have said because I was convinced that she was too perfect [to be gay].

It was difficult for this mother to understand that her daughter was a lesbian because her daughter did not appear to be tormented or grief stricken like media images of lesbians suggest. She thought her daughter was "perfect" in the sense that she was an over-achiever at school, and seemed happy and healthy. Although some gay, lesbian, and bisexual people struggle to cope in a homophobic society, this mother needed to know that her daughter could be a lesbian and still be perfect. Other parents hear on the news about the negative aspects of gay life. News most often run articles on gays, lesbians, and

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<sup>3</sup>Bisexuals are virtually invisible in mass media and thus struggle to find any representation, let alone diverse representation.

bisexuals in relation to AIDS, gay bashing, and same-sex discrimination. Rarely are gay, lesbian, and bisexual people portrayed as happy and successful. One father commented, "I hear on the radio...70-80% of HIV is still among the gay community." Another mother made note of gay bashing she had heard of in her area: "There was that incident by Fabricville, a young chap was beaten to death." Although HIV infection and gay bashing are serious concerns within gay, lesbian, and bisexual communities, parents needed to see media images that portray gay, lesbian, and bisexual people as healthy and happy.

Third, the invisibility of gay, lesbian, and bisexual characters within the context of family relations made it difficult for parents to imagine having gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. One father commented on how seeing a movie about a father and his gay son helped him.

I saw a movie at Wormwood [theater] that I found helpful simply because it was a much more human and natural portrayal of homosexuality. It was a story of a father and his [gay] son in Australia...just seeing something like that I thought brought a certain comfort level.

This father appreciated the movie because it not only portrayed a gay man as someone ordinary, who had hopes and struggles like anyone else, but also because he was able to connect with the father. What brought him the feeling of comfort was the fact that he and his son were both represented in this movie. Media representation was an important factor in aiding his move toward understanding and accepting. One mother told me how media representation of "average" looking gays would have been beneficial to her, and to society in general.

If people see people like Greg [gay son] and yourself...regular people from regular normal families who are gay too, then I think that would be a real [help]. If I had known somebody who was just a regular person that was gay, then I would have

been reassured. But the only gay people I knew were people who you see on TV or the stereotyped people.

At monthly PFLAG meetings, I noticed that members often brought newspaper articles and movie titles that they thought would be beneficial for other members of the group to read and see. In light of the importance media has on their understanding and acceptance, I have mentioned here, a few movies that include gay, lesbian, and bisexual characters in the last 50 years, and I discuss how the news has shaped these parents' images of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people.

Popular film, as an example of mass media, has the potential to provide audiences with enlightening, insightful, and representative stories about the diversity of sexual orientation found in Western society. However, films produced in the earlier part of this century (in a time when parents in my study were growing up and cultivating their value systems) did not present gay, lesbian, and bisexual characters as well-rounded people, or people in the context of inter-generational relationships with parents and other family members. The 1996 documentary, The Celluloid Closet, used film clips from the 1930s through the 1950s to show how gays and lesbians in cinematic themes were laughed at or pitied by the viewers. Gay film characters in the last century have included psychopathic killers, such as in the 1960s movie Psycho, in which a gay psychopath kills a motel patron instead of giving her fresh towels, and evil villains, such as in the James Bond action adventure movie, Diamonds are Forever, in which James Bond torches the gay characters. Gay movie characters have also been portrayed as victims of suicide, such as in the 1959 movie, Suddenly Last Summer, where a gay man entices a group of cannibalistic children into serving him for dinner. As Liard (1996) accurately states, "gay men have been

portrayed as sick and bizarre characters, but never as men in stable couple relationships, or as men connected to their families” (p. 92).

Lesbian characters in popular film have had similar roles as gay men. Liard (1996) comments that “lesbians have been depicted as self-loathing, doomed creatures whose ultimate solution was death” (p. 92). Death was the fate of the lesbian role played by Shirley Maclain in the 1961 movie The Children’s Hour. A 1967 movie, The Fox, suggested that all a lesbian really needed was a man, and had the lesbian character crushed to death by a tree that fell between her legs. Representation of bisexuality in the media has been virtually non-existent. The invisibility and distortion of gay, lesbian, and bisexual characters suggest to parents that being gay, lesbian, or bisexual is not acceptable.

In the last decade, however, there have been an increasing number of films that portray gays and lesbians in the context of family life. One of the first of these films was Philadelphia, a 1993 film about a gay man living with, and then dying from, AIDS. The main character is a gay man, who has a loving and supportive family that welcomes and includes his partner. A 1995 Australian film, entitled The Sum of Us, is a story of a loving father-son relationship, in which the father worries that his gay son had not yet settled down with a life partner and tried to match him up. A movie that truly unites homosexuality and family is the 1996 film, Twilight of the Golds, in which a family had to contend with genetic testing of their unborn child, which showed he was genetically predisposed towards being gay. These new gay and lesbian themes are “pioneering efforts to shift one of the most powerful narratives in American culture, a narrative that says that



the concept of gay and the concept of family may not be linked in common discourse” (Liard, 1996, p. 93).

The news also plays a critical role in shaping parents’ images of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. Perhaps even more pervasive than popular film, the news has tracked and has been a driving force in the evolution of societal attitudes toward homosexuality and bisexuality. For most people, what is seen and heard in the news is accepted as reality. Unfortunately, as Alwood (1996) states, “the capacity of the news media to create and perpetuate prejudice is one of the most unsettling and frightening aspects of American journalism” (p. 6). Although exposure from the gay rights movement and the AIDS epidemic have accomplished a great deal recently in the way the media portrays gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, a lot of homophobic and biphobic propaganda was handed to the parents I interviewed as they were growing up.

In 1963, the New York Times ran its first front page story on gays and lesbians, which described them as “deviates, condemned to a life of promiscuity.” In 1967, a CBS documentary characterized homosexuality as “a mental illness which has reached epidemic proportions” (Alwood, 1996, p. 6). The authoritative tone of these articles is very powerful in maintaining homosexuality as a sin or sickness. One mother I interviewed commented, “before [I found out], if there was a gay issue in the newspaper, I didn’t bother to read it. Why would I? It didn’t affect me.” I would argue, however, that newspaper images and messages, and lack of, did affect her before she found out. Although she may not have taken interest in reading articles specifically related to homosexuality, glancing over homophobic messages in headlines send enough

information to create negative perceptions of homosexuality and bisexuality.

Furthermore, the lack of gay, lesbian, and bisexual imagery in newspapers and news magazines creates the perception that these people do not exist.

Over the decades, the guise of neutral, objective reporting has given the media a track record in delivering misinformation and distortion to North American audiences. However, since the gay rights movement and the AIDS crisis, gay and lesbian journalists began to play an important role in shaping how gays and lesbians were portrayed by the media. AIDS was virtually ignored by the media until Rock Hudson's death in 1985. Since then, major newspapers and magazines gradually increased their gay and lesbian coverage to a point where now, it is routine to read and hear about gay and lesbian issues in daily newspapers. For the parents I interviewed, it was important that they were able to see diverse, representative images of gay, lesbian, and bisexual characters who are healthy and happy

#### Social Policy.

North Americans live within the context of social policies that shape their lives, define opportunities, establish rights and protections, and set out the rules and mutual responsibilities included in the social contract between citizen and the state (Hartman, 1996)

For parents of gay, lesbian, and bisexual children, social policies are important in establishing attitudes, values, and beliefs pertaining to homosexuality and bisexuality. Laws that deny gays, lesbians, and bisexuals basic human rights and freedoms send a message that these lifestyles are unacceptable. The Canadian legislative landscape has changed considerably over the last 50 years--the details of which are beyond the scope of this study. But gays, lesbians, and bisexuals have been fighting for inclusionary social

policy and are gradually becoming successful. For the parents I interviewed, it was concerning for them that their children would not be able to legally marry, acquire spousal pensions and benefits, and adopt children. Knowing that the government was changing social policies to protect gay, lesbian, and bisexual people from discrimination helped parents better accept their children. One example of progressive legislation was passed recently in Nova Scotia, which became the first province in Canada to recognize gay and lesbian unions as equal to heterosexual unions by changing the definition of spouse under Nova Scotia's Public Servants Superannuation Act and the Teachers Pensions Act (Armstrong, 1998). One mother said that hearing about this legislation helped her because she knew that it would allow her gay child to acquire spousal benefits to which her other children would also be entitled. However, it also reminded her of the discriminatory legislation that still exists.

Some parents I interviewed said that after they found out their children were gay, lesbian, and bisexual, they began voting for the political party they perceived as being the most progressive in the fight for gay, lesbian, and bisexual equity in social policy. One father commented, "the party of my choice is NDP, and I would go out of my way to vote or work for a gay politician." Another mother also commented, "I'm, more apt to vote NDP because I know that they are behind gay people more so than any other party.... I was so upset when I heard that [the] Reform [Party] had gotten out west. I thought, 'what is wrong with you people.'" These parents recognized the importance of having progressive social policy for the welfare of their children. Social policy change based on the fundamental belief that gay, lesbian, and bisexual people deserve equal rights and

privileges made it easier for these parents to accept their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children.

### Community-Level Factors

Community is defined as a social context in which a group of people interact with each other on a regular basis. Parents who perceived their communities to be intolerant of homosexuality and bisexuality felt alienated and uncomfortable in their communities. Many recognized and disagreed with the discriminatory behaviors of members of their communities but had difficulty accepting their children's sexual orientation because they witnessed, first hand, the oppression and stigmatization against gays in their communities. Living and working in homophobic social contexts also made it difficult to imagine how their children could find communities that would be open and accepting. Living in social contexts that were supportive of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people made understanding and accepting easier. For these parents, communal contexts, such as neighborhoods, friends, religious groups, workplaces, support groups, and recreational clubs, were influential in the process of understanding and accepting.

Neighborhoods. Being exposed to prejudicial and hostile remarks against gay, lesbian, and bisexual people in neighborhood settings made it difficult for parents to accept their children. One mother lived in a rural neighborhood, which made living with her gay child very difficult. "We moved [from our community]. You might as well say they [community members] drove us out.... And the stuff that they would say. You know, 'there is the little fag....'" Her neighborhood community lacked the resources and

diversity to allow her and family to live comfortably. When the neighbors found out that her son was gay, they harassed her and her family until she was forced to leave. In leaving, she gave up her home and neighborhood community for the welfare of her son, which showed that even through adversity, she accepted him.

Friends. The parents I interviewed often relied on friends for emotional support and information. Neisen (1987) reported that friends were the third most popular means of social support, after other family members and support groups, for parents of gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. Having supportive friends helped these parents in their understanding and acceptance. However, some parents I interviewed said that a few of their friends were homophobic and that it was difficult handling them. These parents spoke out against homophobic remarks made by their friends, but felt more distant from them. One mother started countering the homophobic remarks her friend was making,

[My friend] was here one day, and he said, 'God, you have a lot of fags here in Halifax. Down on Spring Garden Road, there are fags everywhere.' I said, 'well perhaps, Jim, that is because none of them will live in Cape Breton where people like you call them fags.'

The comment her friend made was disturbing to her because he was unknowingly talking about her son in a derogatory way. But by speaking out against his homophobic remark, this mother was declaring her understanding and acceptance of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. In her response, she acknowledged the fact that it is difficult for many gay, lesbian, and bisexual to live in Cape Breton, which is mainly a rural area of Nova Scotia. She also made it very clear that she would not tolerate the use of "fag" as a homophobic slang for gay. Having the opportunity to speak out against homophobia helped her form and articulate her opinions about homosexuality, and her feelings about her gay son.

Not all parents were able to turn homophobic remarks made by friends into a way to help them move toward understanding and acceptance. For them, homophobia among friends was a factor that hindered their understanding and acceptance. Friends can be influential by giving advice to parents who have gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. Because of the misperceptions about sexual orientation, friends can give bad advice that can have a detrimental effect on a parent's understanding and acceptance. One mother commented, "I had a friend of mine say to me at one point in time, 'did you ever have his hormones checked?' And I thought, 'I need this like I need a hole in the head, lady.'" Her friend was trying to be helpful by suggesting that she should go to the doctor and ask to have her gay son's hormones checked. Although the mother recognized that her friend's advice was misinformed, she realized that comments like that affect her anyway. The comment itself suggested that there was something wrong with her son (i.e., hormonal imbalance) and that perhaps there was a way to 'fix' his sexual orientation. Even though she believed that sexual orientation was not something that could be changed by doctors, the element of doubt about her own convictions was introduced by this piece of advice. And although her friend may not have been making homophobic remarks, her comment created a barrier to understanding and acceptance that this mother had to overcome.

Workplace. Unlike friends, workplace communities are made up of individuals who are not necessarily brought together by common interests or personal compatibility. Employees at a company often come from diverse backgrounds and spend most of their lives working with each other, sometimes when their political and social views are worlds apart. After finding out their children were gay, lesbian, and bisexual, parents became

acutely aware of how homophobic their co-workers and employers were. This heightened sensitivity to homophobic remarks made in the workplace caused distress in parents because they did not feel comfortable working in organizations that promoted homophobia. Anytime a co-worker unknowingly made derogatory comments about the sexual minority group to which their children belong, it was hurtful. For this reason, it was important that parents felt comfortable at the workplace. One woman said that it helped to have an understanding boss.

I went to my boss and told him that something had happened in my family and that I wasn't myself, and that I didn't know if I was going to be able to work. I mean I just went in his office and just cried for two hours. He was exceptionally good. He just told me whatever I wanted, I could have.

For this mother, having a boss who was understanding helped her in that he gave her time and space to work through her struggles. However, being around co-workers who made homophobic or biphobic jokes made understanding and acceptance difficult. It made this mother feel that her daughter had to work in a position of power, so that she would not be discriminated against in the workplace. “[Professionals] are better accepted, that is why we are pushing for Sally to get back to school. I told her, ‘you’ve got to be a professional, You have no choice.’” Workplace homophobia and biphobia made it difficult for parents’ acceptance of their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children.

Religious groups. Involvement in religious groups can either aid or hinder parents’ understanding and acceptance. Some parents found it difficult to move toward understanding and acceptance because their homophobic church groups were important sources of socialization, support, and information. Some abandoned their religious communities with the knowledge that it would be impossible to reconcile their religious

views with the fact that their children are a part of a stigmatized sexual minority. Other parents who remained involved with their religious communities often felt distanced from them. One father commented, "I am sorry that in my church group the subject has not yet been mentioned, and it's still taboo as far as I can see...but maybe before I am gone...I can do something about it." Other parents found that their acceptance was aided by the fact that their church was supportive of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. "Our church has a whole program to help people understand their homophobia and to make the church more welcoming to gays, lesbian, and bisexuals." Being a member of a gay-affirming religious organization positively influenced parents' understanding and acceptance.

Support groups. All of the parents who attended PFLAG said that attending the meetings was helpful in their understanding and acceptance of their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. In one study of 65 parents, 25% said that a support group entitled, Friends and Family of Lesbians and Gays provided help in their efforts to cope (Niesen, 1987). Most of the parents I interviewed who attend PFLAG had positive things to say about the group. "I think PFLAG is super...it can be very helpful, supportive, and it normalizes [homosexuality]." In joining PFLAG, many parents were seeking a new community for support because their existing communities were not supportive of homosexuality and bisexuality. However, one mother remarked that PFLAG is limited because meetings only occur once a month. "PFLAG is a really good support, if you can compartmentalize your life once a month." She recognizes that although the support group is important to her, it doesn't meet her needs because she still interacts in other communities, which are very homophobic.



Not all groups that parents attend for support in understanding and accepting their children are helpful. One father discussed his unsuccessful attempt at bringing up his daughter's bisexuality and his own attractions to men at his men's group,

I spoke about Linda there...it was an enormous step [for me] to talk about that part of myself--my degree of experience and connection to men as well as women. That went over like a lead balloon, they did not want to talk about it."

Although he was disappointed that the group was not more supportive of the issues, he said that the attempt was a really important part of becoming more clear about how he made sense of his sexual orientation. For this father, just having the opportunity to publicly state, through his support group, that his daughter was bisexual and that he thought that he might also be bisexual was an important event in his development.

Recreational clubs. A recreational club is an example of a group of people brought together by a common interest, but not necessarily personal compatibility. Some examples of recreational clubs include community choirs, lawn bowling clubs, and outdoor clubs. People join recreational clubs to meet people and engage in a hobby that interests them. However, some parents of gay, lesbian, and bisexual children found it difficult to engage in a recreational activity with homophobic members of the club. The barrier to desired recreation because of homophobia within recreational clubs can have quality of life implications for these parents. One mother I interviewed discussed the verbal abuse she received from a member of her recreational club:

she [club member] said to me and my friend, at the top of her voice in front of everybody, "which one of you is the butch?" And I said, "Pardon?" So then she repeated it. And it was just too much for me. I just burst into tears and left.

One of the reasons the homophobic comment made her upset was because she had

recently found out that her son was gay. The comment was particularly derogatory because it was a personal “accusation” of being a lesbian, rather than a joke in general about gay people. It was a reminder of the harassment that gay, lesbian, and bisexual people face on a daily basis. She did not feel comfortable at her recreational club, and constant homophobic comments could have prevented her from staying with the club. Homophobia, biphobia, and heterosexism in recreational clubs can hinder a parent’s ability to understand and accept his or her gay, lesbian, or bisexual child.

### Family-Level Factors

The man who said faggot, does he know what he's done?  
 Passing his thoughts down to a daughter or son.  
 The man who said faggot, I wish he would die.  
 But instead, he has a business dressed in a tie.  
 The man who said faggot, he just doesn't see,  
 what he has said is a result of society.  
 The man who said faggot, he's afraid of homosexuality.  
 But most people are in all reality.  
 The man who said faggot, just doesn't understand  
 that word hurts as much as a whip or a hand.  
 The man who said faggot is one of a long list,  
 ready to fight with a word or a fist.  
 The man who said faggot, the insults get bigger.  
 Soon it will be, "You bitch" or "You nigger."  
 -a sister of a gay man

This poem was given to me by a mother during one of my interviews. Her daughter wrote it in reaction to the homophobic harassment her gay brother was enduring at his high school. During the interview, the mother invited me to read it on the tape machine and the father said he found it difficult to hear or read, “it completely chokes me up,” he said. The intense emotional reaction that the poem evoked in the father (e.g.

sadness for his son and pride in his daughter) showed not only how family members, including siblings of gay, lesbian, and bisexual children are affected by homophobia and heterosexism, but also how family members can influence the parental process of understanding and acceptance of their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. Most family research has taken a between-family approach, in which comparisons are made among individuals from different kinds of families, rather than a within-family approach, in which interactions between members within families are studied (Pillemer & McCartney, 1991). Consequently, relatives of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people (siblings, grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles, and in-laws) are nearly invisible in the scholarly literature (Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996). In spite of this, I demonstrate in the following sections how family members play a crucial role in the parental process of understanding and acceptance.

Family structure and dynamic. Family structure and dynamic influenced parents' understanding and acceptance of their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. When their children came out, some parents said that there were shifts in family members' positions and roles. Some family members became closer to each other, while others distanced themselves. Some parents had difficulty in accepting the changes in the family structure that arose from their children's self-disclosures. Strommen (1990) states, "in families where traditional rituals were given high status, the need to adopt to new, unfamiliar types of relationships, particularly a same-sex relationships, may be stressful and conflict-producing" (p. 12). Other parents were prepared to make serious changes to their family structure. One mother decided to take a zero-tolerance policy regarding homophobia

within her family of origin. She said to her relatives,

“either you accept [my lesbian daughter] or you lose everybody.” Like I would make no bones about it. I said, “If I ever hear any of you say anything or laugh at her or make fun of her, that will be it. You’ll lose me [and my husband and two kids].”

In taking a zero-tolerance policy to homophobia among family members, she was willing to change the family structure and dynamic of her family of origin to a point where they were no longer in her life. In threatening to cut off ties with her parents and siblings, she sent a message to her family that she accepted her daughter, and would not tolerate any jokes or negative comments about her. Her actions demonstrated that she understood the injustice that gay, lesbian, and bisexual people face in terms of being ridiculed and discriminated against and that she accepted her daughter by taking her side in fighting for fair treatment for her within the family.

Disclosure that occurred in the context of privacy versus intimacy. For some parents, their move toward understanding and acceptance was influenced by whether their children came out to them in the contexts of intimacy or privacy. Intimacy is often related to the sharing of private thoughts, dreams, and beliefs; commitments; and affections. Privacy, on the other hand, is associated with concepts of solitude, secrecy, and autonomy (Ben-Ari, 1995). When coming out occurred within the context of privacy, some parents had difficulty adjusting to the information. One mother, who found out her son was gay through a letter commented, “I thought we had a very good relationship, so that is what made me angry--that he told me in the letter and not by himself.” By “good relationship,” this mother thought that the relationship with her son was intimate enough that he could have told her in person. But by receiving the news in a written letter, she felt insulted that

her son did not feel close or comfortable enough to tell her in person. Receiving the letter made her feel distant towards her son, which made it more difficult to move towards understanding and acceptance. Another mother found out her son was gay through a letter and had a similar reaction: "In the end, which I felt quite sad about, he had to write me a letter. He did not feel he could tell me himself, which I thought was ever so sad." This mother did not resent her son for writing a letter, but felt bad that her son didn't feel comfortable approaching her.

The preferred context for disclosure was not the same for all parents however. Some parents would have preferred it if their children came out in the context of privacy instead of intimacy. One daughter, who came out to her parents on a home video, sat with her parents as they watched it. Her mother commented, "I think had it been me I would have left the tape here and gone out.... It was pretty difficult." This mother found it particularly difficult to sit with her daughter and watch this video and she reflected back and regretted the events that happened after she watched the video. In an informal conversation I had with a member of a PFLAG group in Ontario, a mother said that many parents she had spoken to were glad that their children wrote them letters because it gave them time to think about the new information. They said that if their children told them in person, their emotions may have overpowered them and they might have regretted the things they said and did. One son described his parents' reaction to his self-disclosure as follows: "My mom was crying and my dad said, 'you may as well have pulled the trigger. She started beating on me and pulling at my hair, and she threw herself against the sliding glass door'" (Muller, 1987, p. 37).

It is important for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people to assess the relationship they have with their parents to predict if their parents would prefer it if they came out in the context of intimacy or privacy, because the context can play an influential role for parents in their move towards understanding and accepting their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children.

Homophobia among family members. Parents found it difficult to maintain ties with homophobic relatives with whom they had been close to in the past. One mother commented:

I talked to my brother-in-law who is quite homophobic. He's one of these guys that we socialize with a lot. Like he couldn't get through an evening without saying something derogatory. He wouldn't be so polite as to call them gays. He would say to kill them all.

Another mother said:

my sister had an apartment for rent, and I asked her, "what would you do if two young women or two young men came to rent from you?" And we really didn't get to the bottom of it. I don't know if she would rent to them...things like that really hurt me.

The negative response from her sister made this mother upset because it reminded her that homophobia was very close to home.

Some parents found it helped to have social and emotional support from their families. One mother said "oh, I called my sister the very next day because I am very close to her...we cried on the phone for hours." Other parents found it difficult to cope without the support of other family members: "I can deal with my son being gay, but I have a difficult time with my husband's reaction to the news." Another mother said, "the hardest part has not been so much him telling me he's gay, as trying to figure out how to

best deal with the rest of the family.” Other parents found it helpful to see family members react positively to the news: “But the way our kids both reacted to it [child’s coming out], it made us feel that it was closer to a non-event, that it wasn’t that big a deal.”

These quotes demonstrate that because other family members were often very emotionally and socially connected to the parents I interviewed, their negative or positive reaction to the news was a significant factor in aiding or hindering understanding and acceptance of their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children.

Knowing other family members who are gay. Many parents talked about other family members who were gay, lesbian, and bisexual. Having these relatives in the family was an influential factor in the parental process of understanding and accepting in the sense that they served as role models, or were people that parents approached with questions or concerns. However, some parents said that their gay relatives did not portray images that helped their understanding and acceptance of their child. One mother commented, “I have a cousin who is gay. He’s kind of not what you would look for in a role model, I guess. He’s kind of one of those guys that people kind of feel sorry for.” Another mother did not have any gay, lesbian, or bisexual relatives that she knew of, but wondered about some of her nephews. She said it would be nice to see other family members come out so that she would not have to feel so alone in terms of having a gay son.

Meeting their children’s partners. Parents of gay, lesbian, and bisexual children are not only challenged to deal with their children’s sexual identities, but also to

understand and accept the fact that they will potentially have to meet their children's partners who are gay, lesbian, and bisexual. Parents who have difficulty in understanding and accepting their children may have even more difficulty in allowing their children's significant others in their lives. One mother said that she would feel uncomfortable observing physical and intimate displays of affection between her son and his partner. On the contrary, some parents worried that their gay sons would lead lonely lives because their perception of "the gay lifestyle" was one in which men had sex with other men, but never formed lasting relationships and grew old without family. One father I interviewed said that he has accepted his son's homosexuality, but anxiously awaited the day when he finds a life partner. This father's comment shows that even though he recognized that his son was gay and presumably would not have children through heterosexual marriage, he was still concerned about him having a companion. He understood that having relationships with members of the same sex were important for his son just as having opposite-sex relationships are for his other son. Another mother fantasized about what her children's partners would be like and commented,

I always thought about the kids dating together because I used to date with my older sister. I was thinking, wouldn't it be nice if Jen [other daughter] met a guy that had a gay sister and then the four of them could date."

By thinking of such a situation, this mother reconnected the dreams and fantasies she had about her daughter that were abandoned when she found out she was a lesbian. In moving towards understanding and acceptance, she realized that she could maintain her hopes and aspirations for her daughter, with slight variations.

Another mother found that her understanding of her son's homosexuality greatly



increased when she met his partner. Before that point she would tell him, “I just can’t picture you with another man.” She said she felt much better about her son being gay when she met his partner because she liked him and was able to see the affection and kindness he showed to her son.

### Individual-Level Factors

Individual differences among the parents I interviewed influenced how they understood and accepted their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. Married partners, who lived in similar societal, community, and family contexts, often had different reactions and experiences after finding out their children were gay, lesbian, and bisexual. These individual differences included their ability to resolve cognitive dissonance, willingness to learn, ability to shift identity, and current and previous personal life experiences.

Cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance is defined as the discomfort associated with the awareness of disagreement or lack of harmony between two or more of one’s own beliefs (Gray, 1994). Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that people are motivated to avoid or reduce disharmony among their various attitudes, beliefs, and bits of knowledge. Parents who had stereotypical images of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people entered a state of internal disharmony when they find out that their children were gay, lesbian, or bisexual. One woman said,

when Connie came out, I had this terrible stereotype of, you know, work boots, the big hunting jacket...[I told her], ‘Please Connie, don’t let them [gays] make you into someone that is never going to want to be a woman anymore.’”

The cognitive dissonance this mother felt was between the belief that lesbians wanted to

be men because they wore men's clothing and the newer bit of information that her daughter was a lesbian. These two thoughts were disharmonious both because her daughter did not fit the lesbian image she had, and that she did not want her daughter to turn into her image of a lesbian. In an effort to reduce her cognitive dissonance, she had two options. First, she could have maintained the belief she had of lesbians and abandoned her daughter because she did not want a daughter who would rather be a man. Alternatively, she could have changed her perception of lesbians to include the image she had of her daughter. By choosing the second of the two options, she placed herself on the road to understanding and acceptance.

Parents who choose the first of the two options created unhealthy and sometimes dangerous situations, both for themselves and their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. For example, the Globe and Mail newspaper featured an article written by a mother who had found out her son was gay (Weber, 1998). She wrote, "[My son] said that he was tired of living a lie to himself and everyone else and that he wanted very much for me to understand and accept [his homosexuality]." Instead of abandoning her beliefs that homosexuality was a sickness and a sin, she "fell back on the bible" and decided that she and her other sons should shun her gay son--pretend that he did not exist until he changed his ways. A year later, he committed suicide. Disturbingly, she described her inability to make sense of what happened as follows, "I think we were all just trying to make some sense out of the whole thing. But there was no sense to be made of it." For this mother, the two pieces of disharmonious information were that homosexuality was a sin and sickness, and that her son was gay. In trying to reduce her cognitive dissonance, she tried

to change her son's sexual orientation, rather than changing her beliefs about homosexuality. Her son committed suicide probably because he realized that his homosexuality was not something he could change, and because of that, his family would never accept him. This example shows how important it is that parents are able to resolve their cognitive dissonance when they find out their children are gay, lesbian, and bisexual without harming themselves or their children. Furthermore, parents who change their negative perceptions of homosexuality and bisexuality, instead of trying to change their children, are able to move towards understanding and acceptance of their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children.

Willingness to learn. Parents who had a willingness to ask questions and learn about homosexuality and bisexuality were able to move through the process of understanding and accepting faster than those who resisted learning, or did not have the skills or capacity to learn. One father stated,

I have this tendency to want to understand things so I had, on the spot, made a resolution to try to understand as much as can be understood about being gay and lesbian, what it means psychologically and sociologically for gays and lesbians and bisexuals to fit into society.... Just looking around I realize how many there are in important places in literature and arts and in performing arts.... That kind of thing helped me along. They are clearly useful members of society.

By learning about how gay, lesbian, and bisexuals can contribute to society, this father found a way to understand and accept his son. His predisposition to wanting to learn was an aiding factor in his understanding and acceptance. By perceiving gays, lesbians, and bisexuals as having positive, meaningful roles in society, he was able to find contentment in the thought that his son was gay.

The ability to shift identity. When their children came out, the parents I interviewed not only had to acknowledge the new sexual identity of their children, but to also accept the fact that by being parents of a gay, lesbian, and bisexual children, their place in society had shifted. One mother declared during our conversation, “my daughter is a lesbian, so that makes me a lesbian’s mother!” In making this statement, she shifted her perception of her place in society away from “normal” and towards “marginal.” Although she was not a lesbian herself, homophobic and heterosexist pressures affected her in ways that also affect her daughter. Having the ability to make this perceptive shift helped her in understanding and accepting her daughter’s lesbianism. With this new identity, she was able to empathize with her daughter and fight against homophobic discrimination. Parental identity shift is found in the literature as well. One father stated,

I’ve never been on the outside. I’ve never had a door slammed in my face because I was the wrong religion, wrong color, the wrong educational status, I looked funny.... I didn’t have any of these things that ever made me feel I’m a part of a minority and...now, I’ve suddenly been moved, by association, to a group that is a vulnerable and discriminated against minority. And I’m not a homosexual. It’s changed me. (Thompson, 1997, p. 7).

This white, heterosexual, middleclass father felt that before he found out his son was gay, he had never felt marginalized by society. But because of his close association to his son, he now felt that he was also in the margins. By changing his perception about his place in society, he positioned himself to better understand and accept his gay son.

Other personal experiences occurring at the time of disclosure. Parents’ experiences and reactions to their children’s self-disclosure did not exist in a vacuum. Their ability to understand and accept their children’s homosexuality and bisexuality

depended, in part, on other personal life events (e.g., health problems, work-related stress, family-related problems, and marital problems) that occurred at the time of disclosure. Some parents I interviewed said that it was difficult to isolate how this experience affected them. "It's hard to tell because there are thousands of other things going on in your life." However, many discussed important events in their lives that they thought were linked to their reactions and experiences of finding out their children were gay, lesbian, and bisexual. One woman, who was dealing with a lot of other serious family-related problems felt that having a gay son was nothing compared to the other issues she had to contend with. She commented, "don't sweat the small stuff, and believe me, this [son being gay] is small stuff." The adversity she endured in her life helped her understand and accept the fact that her son was gay because she was able to put the news in perspective: "Gay is nothing [compared to my other experiences], gay is fine by me." Other parents also said that being able to compare other adverse experiences to the experiences they had regarding their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children helped them come to terms with the news:

I remember one day, I had this urge to call my friend up whose daughter was killed in a car accident, to talk to her and tell her how upset I was. But then I thought, "she would probably think, 'You silly woman, You've got your daughter...how dare you be sad.' And once I started thinking about putting things in perspective like that, I think it really helped me."

Having the experience of knowing another mother who lost her daughter enabled this mother to realize that she would rather try to understand and accept her daughter than to loose her.

Past personal experiences. Past personal experiences influenced how parents

understood and accepted their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. For example, one father stated that he could understand some of the oppression that his gay son faced because he also has felt a great deal of oppression in his life: "I happen to be Jewish, and that is a group that has been persecuted. I, myself, suffered direct persecution and a great deal of it." Making parallels between his experiences of oppression and the oppression of his gay son, he was able to better move towards understanding and acceptance.

Other past experiences hindered parents understanding and acceptance of their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. One father of a gay son described how his experience as a young man in Scouts formed his perceptions of gay men: "I saw homosexuals that I just hated. The only ones I saw were in Scout camp, where these leaders in authority would take advantage of [their power] and find themselves young meat" (Thompson, 1997, p. 5). This father had first-hand negative experiences with gay men as he was growing up, by which he generalized that all gay men took advantage of young boys. Unfortunately, due to heterosexism, he believed that the only gay men he saw were those who molested children. If he had known openly gay men who he respected, his perceptions of gays might not have been so negative. Finding out that his son was gay was especially difficult because he said he had been violent towards gays in his youth. By witnessing men and abusing young boys, and by overtly expressing violence towards gays, these past experiences made it difficult for him to understand and accept his son.

### Summary

The factors that influence parents' understanding and acceptance of their gay,

lesbian, and bisexual children are found at society, community, family, and individual levels. For each parent, a combination of these factors influenced how they came to terms with the news. The factors I presented here had the potential to both help and hinder parents' understanding and acceptance. Based on my analysis of these factors, in chapter six, I discuss how researchers, educators, health professionals, and media persons, parent support groups, and parents themselves can help parents move toward understanding and accepting their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children.

## Chapter Six

### Strategies For Helping Parents and Recommendations for Future Research

This year, members of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), were the honorary grand marshals of the Halifax Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Pride Parade. Their presence in the parade reminded me not only of their struggles and successes in understanding and accepting their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children, but also how members of the gay, lesbian, and bisexual community look upon them with respect and envy. By walking in the parade, these parents were openly declaring their love and support for their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. The parade is a symbolic last leg in their journey to understanding and acceptance. I commend the parents I have met and interviewed for their strength and courage in taking on the challenge of subverting societal homophobia, biphobia, and heterosexism. These parents placed their children first, before themselves and before pressures to conform to normalcy. As one mother told me in our conversation, “you can mess with me, but don’t dare mess with my kid.” I think her words speak on behalf of other parents I interviewed.

Sadly, not all parents have taken “the road less traveled.” Many parents get stuck somewhere in the journey and need structural support to help them along. In this chapter, I provide strategies that researchers, educators, health professionals, parent support groups, and parents themselves could use to help parents understand and accept their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. Finally, I provide suggestions for future research in this area.



### Strategies for Helping Parents

School-based sexual orientation education. Attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality and bisexuality are often formed during childhood. Children are inundated with homophobic schoolyard taunts, such as “fag,” that imply that homosexuality is undesirable (Health Canada, 1996). The formation of negative attitudes and beliefs is influenced, in part, by strong movements within communities to keep sexual orientation education out of classrooms. However, sexual orientation education in schools can offer children accurate knowledge about homosexuality and bisexuality, a forum to address schoolyard homophobic abuse, and an increased representation of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people in the classroom. Many parents and community members fear that including homosexuality and bisexuality in the curriculum will encourage young people to engage in “destructive homosexual activity.” I believe, however, that denying sexual orientation education to children at a young age can influence destructive behavior, such as alcohol abuse, drug abuse, and suicide among those who struggle with their sexual orientation: violence among those who gay-bash; and strife among those people who grow up to become parents of gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. As one woman stated, “education and exposure to gay people would have been helpful.... I could have been so well prepared for this [child coming out] if I had known about homosexuality when I was growing up (Neisen, 1987, p.246).

The following is a list of strategies for teachers, inspired by Treadway and Yoakam (1992), to help all students in their struggles with homophobia, biphobia, and

heterosexism at school: (a) use appropriate terms, such as gay, lesbian, and bisexual, when discussing sexual orientation; (b) challenge derogatory words (e.g., fag, sissy, and dyke); (c) discuss homophobia, biphobia, and heterosexism and how they affect everyone; (d) provide accurate, accessible information about gay, lesbian, and bisexual life, including community resources, posters, brochures, and literature on and by famous gay, lesbian, and bisexual people; (e) use inclusive language when referring to partners; and (f) show positive representations of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people in films, textbooks, and through guest speakers.

Health professionals' sensitivity and education. Many parents find themselves at a loss in terms of taking appropriate steps after they find out their children are gay, lesbian, and bisexual. Some wonder if, through therapy, their children can be "fixed." Others worry about AIDS but do not have the skills to discuss sexual matters with their children. Many turn to their family physicians for advice. Some parents I interviewed were satisfied with the way their family physicians responded to their concerns for their gay children. However, a few of the parents expressed dissatisfaction with doctors. They felt that physicians did not take their concerns seriously; did not give accurate information about being gay, lesbian, and bisexual; and did not make referrals to counselors who could give proper support. Some doctors do not have the understanding required to discuss issues related to having gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. After all, they are influenced by the same homophobic pressures as the rest of society, and unless their medical training has given them some guidelines by which they can talk to parents and youth about being gay, lesbian, and bisexual, one can not assume that they will respond appropriately. Patients

often see their physicians as “experts.” A physician’s advice or comments on homosexuality or bisexuality can have a profound impact on a parent’s understanding and acceptance. It is therefore important that physicians have continuing medical education that informs them of the importance of providing positive feedback for parents who come to them with their concerns for their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children.

Family therapists have the potential to help parents understand and accept their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. However, as McGoldrick (1996) states,

the field of family therapy has assumed heterosexuality in its very definition of family and has been silent on the entire subject of homosexuality except in those few instances in which gays and lesbians themselves have spoken or written about issues that pertain to their experiences (p. xi).

Family counselors and agencies that provide counseling services should take the following steps to ensure they provide appropriate assistance for parents of gay, lesbian, and bisexual children: (a) develop guidelines that recognize the difficulties gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth and their families face in the context of societal homophobia, biphobia, and heterosexism; (b) provide continuing education for staff with regards to the needs of parents who have gay, lesbian, and bisexual children; (c) employ therapists and counselors who are parents of gay, lesbian, and bisexual children themselves; (d) use inclusive language when talking about sexual orientation; and (e) develop a reading list for parents who want to read books and articles about having gay, lesbian, and bisexual children.

Visibility of parent support groups. Parents of gay, lesbian, and bisexual children often find it beneficial to meet and talk with other parents about issues that concern them.

Support groups such as PFLAG are important in providing this outlet. Although there are PFLAG groups in most urban centers in North America, many people do not know of them. During my informal conversations with parents, many said that it would be useful to have increased visibility of PFLAG in the community. One strategy for increasing visibility is to create a pamphlet about the group that would be distributed in community centers. During this past year, as part of the purpose of this thesis, I assisted PFLAG in Halifax in creating such a pamphlet (see appendix E).

Advice from parents of gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. Parents can be helped a great deal through strategies used by educators, health professionals, media, and PFLAG. However, there are ways in which parents can help themselves deal with their struggles to understand and accept their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. During the interviews, I asked parents what advice they would give to parents who are still struggling to understand and accept their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. The following is what they said.

Love them to death.

Let them know that it's okay to be different.

Listen to your child.

Remember they are the same person whose diapers you changed, whose cuts you repaired. They've not changed.

If it bothers you, you've got to get educated and talk about it.... That is where I think PFLAG does really help.

Talk to someone that you feel comfortable with on a one-on-one.

If you keep it to yourself and don't do anything about it, that is not healthy.

Slowly get acquainted with gay and lesbian culture.

Watch some videos about the problems for young lesbian and gays from a parent's point of view.

Give them the unconditional love you always gave them. No strings attached. They are your sons and daughters no matter what. And that is the best gift you can give your children anyhow, is your love and support.

Public awareness campaigns. Recently, there have been an increasing number of “gay affirming” images and messages in newscasts and movies, and on television and radio. However, these messages are often indirect and subtle. As society becomes increasingly open to homosexuality and bisexuality, the possibility arises for health educators and gay rights activists to promote awareness of the detrimental effects of homophobia, biphobia, and heterosexism through advertisements in the media. Hearing and reading well articulated, direct messages in media advertizing that state that gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, like heterosexuals, have the potential to live happy, healthy, and well-balanced lives would help parents who struggle to understand and accept their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children.

### Recommendations For Future Research

Visible minority parents and their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. Visible minority parents may have unique issues concerning their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children and very little research exists in this area. As Hom (1994) points out, “most books on the topic of parents of lesbians and gay children report mainly on white middle-class families” (p. 20). These books portray a rather uniform picture of parental

experiences in regard to their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children, and fail to account for the different experiences of parents of color. Savin-Williams and Rodriguez (1993) suggest that gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons of color experience both homophobia and racism, and are challenged to develop and define both a strong gay identity and a strong ethnic identity. These challenges may extend to parents of color who have gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. Furthermore, culture clashes between immigrant parents and their North-American born children might make understanding and accepting their children very difficult. Studies that explore visible minority parents' struggles to maintain their strong ethnic identities and to participate in North American gay culture would be of great value for educators, counselors, and health professionals in addressing these parents' concerns.

Research that makes explicit links between health and sexual orientation.

Although homosexuality has been taken off the list of mental illnesses in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association since 1973, little effort has been made to bring to light the detrimental health effects of societal homophobia, biphobia, and heterosexism on gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals, their families, and their communities. This research is made possible by expanding the definition of health to mean more than just the absence of disease. Societal homophobia, biphobia, and heterosexism can have negative consequences for mental, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual health. Research that conceptualizes sexual orientation in a health framework would be of great value.

Parents of children who identify as queer. The term "queer" has traditionally been

used as a slang to disparage homosexuals. However, in recent times, queer has been adopted as “an umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications” (Jagose, 1996, p. 1). Many politically-minded gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth are abandoning categorical labels such as gay, lesbian, and bisexual, and instead adopting the term “queer” because it more inclusively describes their sexual marginality. As more gay, lesbian, and bisexual people adopt a queer identity, parents may have difficulty understanding and accepting their children’s identity. For many parents, the term queer has very strong negative connotations, and it may seem incomprehensible for them to perceive their children as queer. Thus, exploration around the issues of queer identity and family relations would be a worthy study.

### Summary

In this chapter, I provided strategies to help parents who struggle with understanding and accepting their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children such as (a) promoting school-based sexual orientation education; (b) establishing health professional sensitivity and training; (c) increasing visibility of parents support groups; and (d) creating public awareness campaigns on the detrimental effects of homophobia, biphobia, and heterosexism. I also provided some suggestions for conducting future research which included (a) research on visible minority parents of gay, lesbian and bisexual children, (b) research that makes explicit links between health and sexual orientation, and (c) research on parents of children who identify as queer.

## Conclusion

This thesis focused on the quality-of-life consequences for parents after they found out that their children were gay, lesbian, and bisexual. Parents' understanding and acceptance of their children's sexual orientation depend on the complex interactions between society, community, family, and individual factors that aid and hinder their move toward understanding and acceptance. Knowledge, both accurate and distorted, that their children are part of a stigmatized and oppressed sexual minority can make the journey toward understanding and acceptance difficult. The messages and information they receive from media, laws, religion, health professionals, acquaintances, friends, and family about gay, lesbian, and bisexual people can promote the formation of negative stereotypes that subsequently influence their understanding and acceptance. Parents who have moved toward understanding are those who have (a) acquired accurate knowledge about homosexuality and bisexuality, (b) been able to distinguish myth from reality, and (c) been able to recognize the issues and concerns of their children, and, consequently, have been able to accept their children's sexual orientations without qualification or condition.

Parents need assistance from educators, health professionals, and media persons, friends, family, and others to give them positive exposure to, and accurate information regarding gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. What is desperately needed is a cooperative effort to eradicate homophobia, biphobia, and heterosexism--the root of parents' struggles in understanding and accepting their gay, lesbian, and bisexual children.



## Appendix A

### Interview Guide #1

#### Preliminary Statement

I will be asking you some questions about your experiences after discovering your child is gay, lesbian, or bisexual (depending on the situation). Feel free to talk at length about your life and your experiences, because I'd like to hear your perspective on living as a parents of a gay, lesbian, or bisexual child.

Feel free to ask me anything you want at any time during the interview. If you need to stop and take a break, or continue another day, please let me know. If at anytime you decide not to continue, feel free to say so. Is there anything you want to know about me or this study at this time?

#### Research Questions #1 and #2

What do parents think, feel, and do after discovering that their children are gay, lesbian, and bisexual, both immediately and over time?

•

1. Tell me about your gay, lesbian, and bisexual son/daughter

Probes --Age

--Sex

--Education

--Personality traits

--How and when did you realize that he/she was gay, lesbian, and bisexual?

2. How did you find out that your child was gay, lesbian, or bisexual

3. (a) Can you remember what you thought and how you felt immediately after you found out that your child identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual?

(b) How have your emotions and thoughts changed over the hours, days, weeks, months, and years (if applicable)?

4. Has your relationship with your child changed since you found out he or she is gay, lesbian, or bisexual? If yes, in what way?

5. How has the experience of knowing that your child is gay, lesbian, and bisexual changed you? (i.e., what effect did it have on you)?

Probes --Religion?

--Sexuality?

--Politics?

--Activism?

6. What did you think about gay, lesbian, and bisexual people before you knew about your son/daughter? Do you think differently about gay, lesbian, and bisexual people now?

**Research Question #3**

**What are the perceived needs of parents who know they have gay, lesbian, and bisexual children?**

**7. What did you do when you found out about your child?**

**Probes --What actions did you take?**

**--Did you seek help?**

**8. Do you feel you have adequate social support to work through the issues you face?**

**9. Do you think there is adequate information about parental issues in the media and other places?**

**10. What resources would you like to see in your community?**

### Interview Guide #2

Questions that were added to the above guide after the third interview

1. Do you think that the closet analogy applies to you?
2. What advice would you give to parents who have recently found out that their children are gay, lesbian, and bisexual?

### Interview Guide #3

Questions that were added after the fifth interview

3. Did you see your son or daughter differently after they came out?
4. Do you think finding out that your son or daughter is gay, lesbian, or bisexual was a significant event in your life?
5. Has finding out changed the way you see yourself?

Probes: As a parent?

As a mother or father?

6. Do you think having a child who is gay, lesbian, or bisexual has affected your mental, emotional or spiritual health?

**Appendix B****Letter Sent With Transcript**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

I would like to thank you for participating in my study. Enclosed with this letter is a transcript of our conversation. Feel free to read it over and make corrections or deletions. If you have had thoughts since our interview that you would like me to consider including in my write-up, I would be interested in reading them. If you do not feel any changes need to be made to the transcript, I will assume that I can use any of the material from the transcript. Once again, any names will be changed so not to reveal your identity. You do not have to mail back the whole transcript, just parts that you have corrected.

I have also included a page with two questions about the interview itself. I would be interested in hearing any thoughts you have on the relevance and limitations of this study. I have included a self-addressed stamped envelope for this. Stay well and I hope to meet you again sometime.

Yours truly,

Justin Jagosh

**Questions Included in Letter**

1. Did you find the interview to be a positive or negative experience (e.g., was it stressful, or did it help you in anyway?)
  
2. Do you have any comments on the relevance of my interview questions, the way I interacted with you during the interview, or anything else?

## Appendix C

### Invitational Letter to Participants

Dear Parent:

As a graduate student in Health Education at Dalhousie University, I am carrying out a study that seeks to better understand the experiences of parents who have gay, lesbian, and bisexual children. I hope to raise awareness of issues that parents face after they realize that their children are gay, lesbian, and bisexual.

I am inviting you to participate in this study. If you agree to partake, you will be asked to spend 1 to 2 hours for an interview. The location and time of the interview will be at your convenience. With your consent, the interview will be tape recorded and later transcribed on to paper. You will have the opportunity to review the transcript and make changes. Your name will not be used in any discussion of, or publication from, this study. Our conversations will be kept confidential. Your participation is strictly voluntary and you will be able to end involvement anytime.

Please feel free to contact me if you are willing to participate, or if you have any questions about the study. My phone number is (902) 425-4704. I look forwards to hearing from you.

Yours truly,

Justin Jagosh, BSc.  
Graduate Student  
Dalhousie University

**Appendix D****Consent form**

I, \_\_\_\_\_ agree to participate in a personal interview with Justin Jagosh, a graduate student in Health Education at Dalhousie University, who is doing a Masters thesis entitled, Parents' Experiences After Discovering That Their Children are Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual.

I understand the information will not identify me in any way, either by name or experience, and the information in this study will be used in a confidential manner. I can choose not to answer certain questions during the interview and I can end my involvement at anytime.

I understand that interview tapes and transcriptions will be kept in a safe place and will only be listened to and read by the researcher. Interview tapes will be erased after the study is completed.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Witness \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_



**Appendix E**

**PFLAG Brochure**

**See pages 114-115**

## Parents react...

### Shock:

*"I was so shocked, I felt like someone punched me in the stomach."*

### Denial:

*"I said, 'No Julie, you're not gay. You're confused. You're shy. The boys don't call you because they don't know what a nice person you are!'"*

### Anger:

*"I remember getting on a bus and going to work and seeing teenagers 15 and 16, holding hands and feeling very angry and annoyed at them for having a heterosexual relationship."*

### Guilt:

*"I thought 'I shouldn't have put my son in piano lessons.'"*

### Grief

*"When Julie told me she was a lesbian, it felt like she had died."*

*"I felt a sense of sadness and loss that there would be no marriage and no grandchildren."*

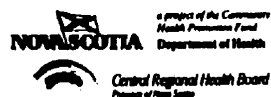
**PFLAG** stands for Parents, Family & Friends of Lesbians and Gays (also bisexual and transgendered people). It is a group comprised of parents, siblings and other interested people. Monthly meetings allow for peer support and education for families and friends through such activities as sharing stories, viewing videos and exploring specific areas of interest with guest speakers.

For more information or just to speak with other parents by phone or in person, contact:

Don or Sylvia 479-1856

Ron 443-3747

e-mail: [ab274@chebucto.ns.ca](mailto:ab274@chebucto.ns.ca)



*support,  
education,  
and  
outreach*



**You've got a family member or friend who is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered ...**

Discovering new information about someone you thought you knew well can be a great shock. Remember, parent's dreams are often not shared or fulfilled by their children no matter what their sexual orientation. Usually such a discovery is complicated by a lack of information and many myths. **Your loved one is the same person he/she was before you found out.**

It's natural to be concerned about your loved one's future happiness and success. Getting accurate information and sources of support can ease your mind and enhance your relationship with your child. We hope this pamphlet can help you get started.

*"My loved one and her partner are loving persons with integrity. My relationship with them is strong and enjoyable. They are both making tremendous contributions to the common good through their professions and their attitudes toward all with whom they have to do."*

## You wonder...

### Why?

No one knows why either same sex or opposite sex attraction exists. It is thought to be a combination of genetic, hormonal, and environmental factors. Whatever the reason, it appears that each person's sexual orientation is set at a very early age.

### Is it my fault?

There are many unfounded myths which cause parents to blame themselves. It is no one's fault. As parents, we love and support our children no matter what their sexual orientation.

### Is he/she really sure?

Although you have just become aware of it, your loved one has probably spent months, maybe even years, thinking about this aspect of him/herself. Unless they have expressed some confusion it is likely that they, like you, "just know" who they are attracted to.

*"I feel better by knowing there is a world out there for people who are not straight. I now realize that all the myths that I had are not true, and that gay people can live a happy and productive life."*

## You worry...

### Do relationships last?

For people who are bisexual, lesbian or gay falling in love with, or being physically attracted to, someone is as natural and normal as it is for a heterosexual person. Successful relationships require the same ingredients regardless of sexual orientation - love, commitment, effective communication, common values, a sense of humour, and the ability to compromise. Any relationship is adversely affected if it does not receive acknowledgment and support from family and community. It is lack of relationship skills or negative reactions from others in the couple's life that can cause problems.

### Will he/she have job security?

Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people work within our communities as teachers, bus drivers, lawyers, carpenters, hair dressers, clergy, politicians, athletes, authors, artists, entertainers, health care workers and anything else you can imagine.

People believing in the myths about gay and lesbian people results in job discrimination, especially in work involving youth. Increased education and human rights protection are slowly resulting in more secure work situations.

*"I am pleased to see my daughter be part of a strong community, be proud of herself and her friends. For me the issue is not who she loves but how she loves and is loved."*

### What about health and safety?

The fact that a person is other than heterosexual does not in itself constitute a health or safety risk. However, just being different in our society can result in hurtful and discriminating behaviors from individuals and institutions.

**Emotional Health:** Growing up surrounded by the stigma attached to being homosexual, bisexual or transgendered can lead to self hatred (internalized homophobia). The result can be self destructive behaviors including suicide.

**Violence:** Anyone even thought to be gay or lesbian is at risk of verbal or physical violence. Parents can do their part by preventing it at home and by speaking up when they hear negative comments or jokes outside the home.

**Physical Health:** Sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS, come up when parents express concern for their child's health. However, it is not sexual orientation which puts individuals at risk but lack of self esteem, social skills and information about sexuality and safer sex practices. **All of our children are at risk.**

*"I had never met a gay person before. My son's coming out has helped me to grow as a person."*

## You learn...

Your local library has books and videos written by, or for, parents. Some suggestions are:

*Now That You Know: What Every Parent Should Know About Homosexuality.* Fairchild & Hayward

*Beyond Acceptance: Parents of Lesbians & Gays Talk About Their Experiences.* Wirth & Griffin

*Bi Any Other Name.*  
Edited by Hutchins & Kaahumanu

*Our Tribe: queer folks, God, Jesus and the Bible.* Rev. Nancy White

Both the library and video stores have documentary and fictional videos. Some examples of specific interest to parents are:

*A Kind of Family*

*School's Out!*

*Out: Stories of Gay and Lesbian Youth*

*The Sum of Us*

On the Internet:

[www.pflag.org](http://www.pflag.org)

[www.pe.net/~bidstrup/parents.htm](http://www.pe.net/~bidstrup/parents.htm)

For more resources or to talk with other parents, contact the PFLAG chapter listed on the back of this pamphlet.

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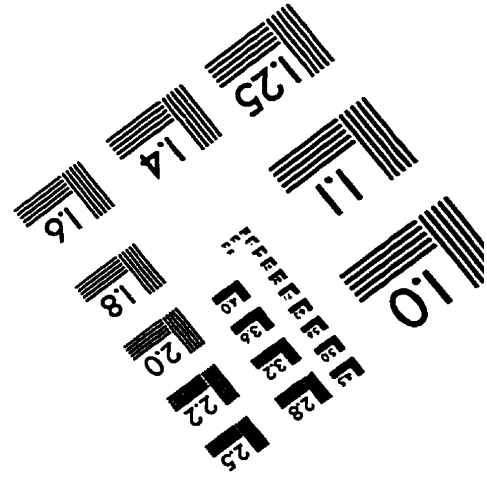
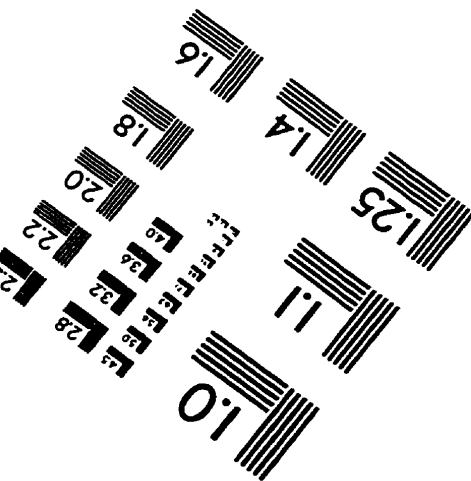
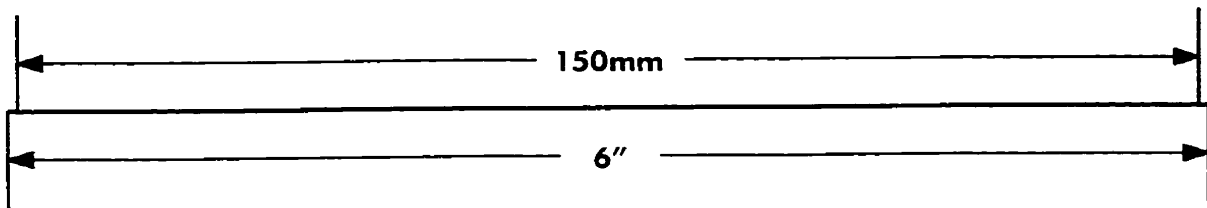
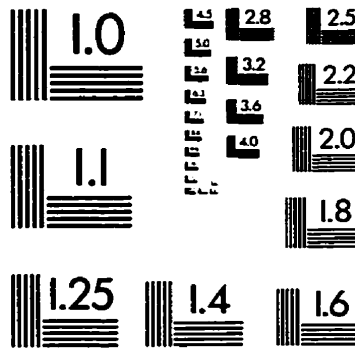
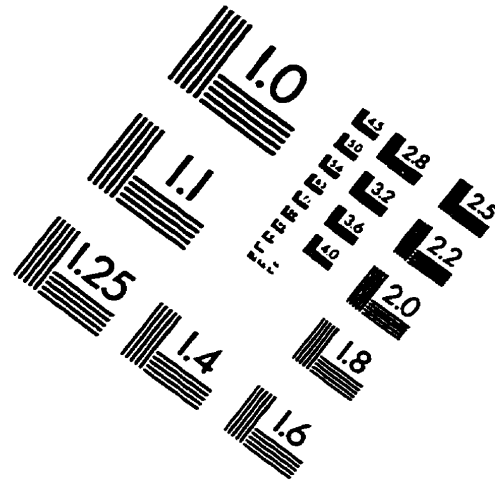
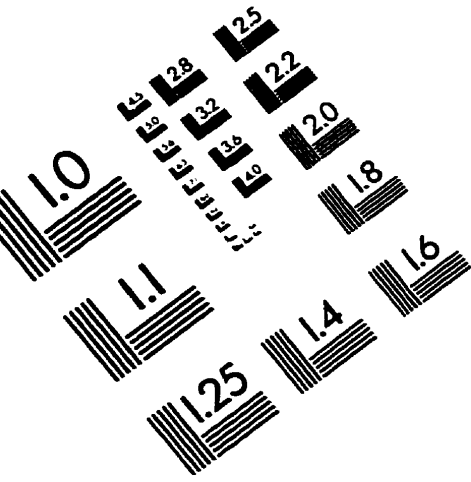
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