Learning That an Adolescent Child Is Gay or Lesbian: The Parent Experience

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Increasing numbers of adolescents are disclosing their sexual orientation to parents at an earlier stage of the family life cycle than their predecessors. Although we know that parents are coexperiencing the range of difficulties reflected in reports of gay and lesbian youths after disclosure, there is a paucity of investigative research exploring the parents' side of adolescent disclosure. The precarious nature of adolescence places these parents in a different set of circumstances than parents of gay adults. This article draws from a study that examined the parent experience at the adolescent stage of the family life cycle. The study explored the meaning parents ascribe to learning that an adolescent is gay or lesbian, how adolescent disclosure affects the solidarity of the parent-child relationship, and what interventions support healthy parent adjustment. Implications for competent social work practice with parents of gay and lesbian adolescents are addressed.

Key words: adolescence; coming out; gay and lesbian adolescents; parent-adolescent relations; parents; phenomenology

As increasing numbers of adolescents are claiming their gay and lesbian identities at an earlier age in conjunction with increased gay and lesbian activism, they are disclosing their sexual orientation to parents at an earlier stage of the family life cycle than their predecessors. Gay and lesbian youths recount stories of ejection from the home, emotional rejection, and family violence as a result of parents learning of their sexual orientation (Hammelman, 1993; Hunter & Schaecher, 1987; Savin-Williams, 1989, 1994). The breakdown in family relationships places the young person at high risk of social isolation, depression, and suicide (Kourany, 1987; Proctor & Groze, 1994; Remafedi, Farrow, & Deisher, 1991). Although we know that parents are coexperiencing the range of difficulties reflected in the personal accounts of these youths, there is little research exploring the parents' side of adolescent disclosure.

Identifying how adolescent disclosure affects parent social-emotional functioning and the solidarity of the parent-child relationship and what interventions support healthy parent adjustment is important for parent and child well-being, family preservation, and culturally competent social work practice. This article draws from a phenomenological study of parents situated in the adolescent stage of the family life cycle—the time of parenting children in high school and the early years of college—before the point of launching children into independent lives. Using a social constructionist lens, the study strived to capture this phenomenon as it unfolds for parents and as it exists in relation to dominant societal themes. The focus therein lies in exploring how parents ascribe meaning to learning that an adolescent child is gay or lesbian and how their stories of parenting following disclosure are constructed from this meaning. Because of societal sanctions...
that have kept substantive understanding limited until recently, parenting gay or lesbian adolescents is being "socially constructed" as parents encounter the experience.

**Literature Review**

The literature discussing family response to learning that an offspring is gay or lesbian has been largely represented by anecdotal writings, a small body of retrospective studies with parents of adults, and selected studies with gay and lesbian adults and adolescents using self-reports. Feelings of loss (Collins & Zimmerman, 1983; De Vine, 1984; Mattison & McWhirter, 1995; Robinson, Walters, & Skeen, 1989), shame (Ben-Ari, 1995; Bernstein, 1990; Hammersmith, 1987; Herdt & Koff, 2000), cognitive and emotional dissonance (Boxer, Cook, & Herdt, 1991), and guilt (Bernstein, 1990; Boxer et al.; De Vine; Herdt & Koff) emerge in the literature as dominant cognitive-affective forces regulating the lives of parents and influencing adjustment.

Several authors identified family adjustment as a progression of linear “stages.” Robinson and colleagues (1989) likened the process to Kubler-Ross’s stages of mourning a death; others have theorized that parents go through parallel stages of identifying as parents of gay men and lesbians to those of their children’s coming-out process (Boxer et al., 1991; De Vine, 1984; Herdt & Koff, 2000). Herdt and Koff posited the process within the context of parents’ ability to cope with crisis and looked to earlier dealings with crisis as indicators for the adjustment process. Although many of the same themes emerged in this study, the developmental context of adolescence signifies unique implications.

Whereas research by Robinson and colleagues (1989), Holtzen and Agriesti (1990), and Herdt and Koff (2000) suggested that most parents eventually accept their offspring’s gay or lesbian identity, the precarious nature of adolescence calls for the vital timing of interventions in response to crisis, placing these parents in a different set of circumstances than parents of gay adults. During these moments of crisis following disclosure, gay and lesbian adolescents are at high risk of depression and suicide (D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Hammelman, 1993; Hershberger & D’Augelli, 1995; Morrison & L’Heareux, 2001; Remafedi et al., 1991), and parents still immersed in their active-parenting roles are faced with the immediacy of the circumstances and the emotional sequelae of their response. Whereas others have found that prior knowledge (Ben-Ari, 1995), educational programs (Holtzen & Agriesti), and support groups (Boxer et al., 1991; Neisen, 1987) may be important factors in parent adjustment, such support structures have not been readily created.

**Parenting at Adolescence**

Parenting at adolescence calls for the intricate balance between letting go for exploration and standing by for support. Generally, the adolescent stage of the family life cycle corresponds with middle adulthood of parents, and many of the respective developmental tasks are realized in the context of the parent–child relationship. Maintaining active parenting, open communication, and regulatory structures are considered critical to healthy adolescent functioning (Collins & Luebker, 1994, Grovetant & Cooper, 1986), and successful maintenance of these tasks appears essential to reconsolidating self-identity and fostering positive self-affirmation at middle adulthood (Breyspraak, 1984; Silverberg, 1996). For parents, this period of self-reappraisal may be closely attached to viewing children’s accomplishments and difficulties as signs of their own successes or failures (Pruchno, Peters, & Bryant, 1996; Seltzer & Ryff, 1994).

Corresponding to the narcissistic pride that parents may derive from their child (Cohen & Weissman, 1984), it would seem likely that feelings of shame or disappointment are also incorporated into the psyche and self-estimation of the parent. For parents just learning that an adolescent child is gay or lesbian, disparaging messages internalized about homosexuality may undermine previously held thoughts about their child as a positive aspect of themselves, creating a sense of narcissistic injury.

**Method**

Given the understudied population and the search for meaning embodied in the research questions, I chose qualitative methodology grounded in phenomenology for the investigation. Any pre-existing notions of the research topic going into the investigation (the phenomenological epoché) were drawn from my experience in the community working with gay and lesbian adolescents as they came looking for pathways to support the painful interactions that ensued when parents learned that they were gay or lesbian and from a
theoretical understanding of the nature of parenting at adolescence.

**Study Design**

The study was modeled after an integration of the phenomenological psychology approaches of Bullington and Karlsson (1984) and Giorgi (1975; von Eckartsberg, 1998). I reapplied these approaches to a phenomenological social work study. Whereas phenomenological psychology looks in depth for structures that carry pertinent psychological meaning (Giorgi, 1983), this study endeavored to uncover structures that carried meaning based on social work training and understanding of the human experience. Although phenomenology is steeped in the processes of grasping the meaning individuals assign to their life experiences (Giorgi, 1983), it views language as what shapes experience into meaningfulness (Merleau-Ponty, cited in Polkinghorne, 1988). It was through listening to parents recount their stories, transcribing the narrative texts, and reflecting on the unique words of each participant that a description of the phenomenon emerged.

**Participants**

Although national family support organizations, such as Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gay Men (PFLAG), served as the primary sampling pool for earlier studies, the PFLAG groups (northeastern region) contacted for this study reported their own limited access to parents of adolescents at the early stages after disclosure. Although many PFLAG chapters generously supported this research, the responses generated through PFLAG were from parents of adult gay men and lesbians. The invisibility of gay and lesbian adolescents' parents became more evident as recruitment for study participants was under way.

Community groups for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning adolescents across one New England state were the primary sources for disseminating information about the study. Adolescents who felt comfortable carrying home this information shared it with parents; adult group leaders disseminated the study literature to any parents known to them. From a statewide network of community groups, seven parents stepped forward. Because of the rigorous process of phenomenological interviewing and analysis, the study sample consisted of seven parent participants, following suggested numerical guidelines for phenomenological inquiry (Creswell, 1998; Giorgi, 1975).

The parents' ages ranged from mid-forties to early fifties, and they all were at a common stage of middle adulthood—parenting adolescents and young adult offspring. Established in their family roles and work positions, they were all beginning to look ahead to the changes and rewards that come with having adult children, including launching them from home and anticipating their careers, marriages, and children.

The five mothers and two fathers were white, middle-class parents residing in suburban areas. Gender breakdown between parents and their adolescents was the following: three mothers had lesbian daughters, two mothers had gay sons, and both fathers had gay sons. The ages of their gay sons and lesbian daughters ranged from 15 to 18 years. The length of time since disclosure was five months (one), six months (one), eight months (one), 12 months (three), and 24 months (one).

**Data Collection**

Emphasis was placed on themes rather than questions, recognizing that as the interview got under way, participants would make the narrative their own by taking the interviewer in unique and personal directions (Kvale, 1983). I used five open-ended interview questions to encourage participants to reflect on the following: their child before coming out, their enduring relationship with their offspring, their thoughts on homosexuality in general, the disclosure, and how the disclosure affected them on an intrapersonal and interpersonal level.

In scheduling the interviews and consenting to audiotaping, mothers and fathers alike considered confidentiality and anonymity important factors in agreeing to participate in the study. The in-depth interviews were conducted individually and lasted from two to three hours, allowing time for the parents to trust the process and get in touch with their dominant thoughts and emotions. By virtue of the nature of narrative interviewing, the parents moved back and forth between the present and the past as they described observations about their child and experiences in both of their lives. There was not a steady sequencing forward of events, but rather a collage of memories and current accounts, consistent with narrative investigation (Polkinghorne, 1988).
Phenomenological Analysis

Capturing the phenomenon exactly as it reveals itself to the “experiencing subject” (Giorgi, 1983) is at the core of phenomenological inquiry. The rigors of phenomenological investigation call for adherence to the steps of the analysis and proficiency in social work interpretation. The steps for analysis include transcribing texts, discerning themes, reflecting on variations of meaning, translating to social work language, moving back and forth between the individual protocols (that is, interviews) to ensure that a structure emerging in one was not overlooked in another, and finally synthesizing the themes into the phenomenological summary (Bullington & Karlsson, 1984; Giorgi, 1975). As phenomenology centers investigative focus on the emergent structures from individual narratives that create a common body of meaning (Polkinghorne, 1988), it was the unique stories of each parent interview converging to produce some unifying aspects that allowed me to identify conclusions that might generalize to other parents experiencing this phenomenon.

Results

The common emergent phenomenological structures (Bullington & Karlsson, 1984) collapsed into five thematic categories—four pertaining to cognitive-affective domains of knowing and feeling and one explicating the organizing structures’ underlying adjustment. Common themes—awareness of difference, knowing with certainty after coming out, emotional detachment, fears of estrangement, and adjustment and education—created a synthesis of the phenomenological “general structure” (Bullington & Karlsson) and lent critical understanding to the phenomenon. The excerpts selected represent the five themes.

Awareness of Difference

We always knew. As the Christmases progressed you saw us buy the little dolls and the trucks, and he would open the male toy and put it down and grab his sister’s toys—the dolls, My Little Pony, and the Barbies—big into Barbies! I remember thinking this is not okay. ... Perhaps in the very back of my mind there was always that wonder, “Is he gay?” (Mother J)

Whereas all of the parents spoke about feeling stunned by the finality of their adolescent’s disclosure, five alluded to a level of semiconscious awareness that they believe existed as far back as childhood. This evolving awareness was grounded in cross-gender qualities noted about the child and prompted them to draw comparisons between their child and other same-gender peers.

For some, remembering an earlier awareness may, in part, be reconstructed memories based on what they now know about their adolescents. However, for three of the parents, recalling the enduring awareness was tied to the actual memory of confiding in a confidante or spouse about fears that their child might be gay or lesbian. These parents described years of vacillating between worrying and trying to avoid the thoughts.

Defending against the underlying worry appeared to be a critical aspect of the evolving structure of knowing and carried particular significance for those parents who had suspected since early childhood. This period of denial created the coping space necessary for integrating the suspicions into their schema about their child and finding ways to manage the more concrete signs as they appeared. There came a time when the suspicions and concrete indicators converged, producing a vision of whom the child was:

When he was in sixth grade, I went up to his room one day and you know those Teen Beat magazines and they have pictures of the boys? The whole wall was filled with popular actors—cute boys. I mean, I’m thinking, “He should have pictures of girls on the wall!” I knew really then. I didn’t want to really know. I hoped against hope it wouldn’t be, but in my heart, I knew then. It was like the photos on the wall were the “writing on the wall.” (Mother P)

Despite their enduring silence, most of the parents knew on some level by adolescence that the same-sex crushes they observed them experiencing represented the object of the adolescent’s romantic affection.

Knowing with Certainty after Coming Out

You know, even though I always thought these things about him, we were still blown out of the water. And you’re hoping so that you’re wrong. It was like our worst fear came true (Mother P).

The moment of certain knowing was a meaningful juncture in time for parents. Despite
months and, in some cases years, of speculation about their child’s sexuality, none of the parents felt prepared to embrace this reality. Emotional responses most noteworthy of capturing the pathos of first learning that an adolescent child was gay or lesbian were states of panic and deep loss, a sense of existential aloneness, and feelings of shame.

Having come of age in an era when being gay or lesbian was a societal taboo, there was universal consensus among the parents in feeling panicked by the disclosure. This state of panic transcended the length of time parents had suspected, parent gender, and child gender and transformed into a state of sadness and despair. Embedded in the sadness and grieving were the idealized dreams that they held for themselves, as parents, and for their child, as an extension of themselves:

I think that the first year of really knowing—you know, having it out in the open—is really, really hard. It’s like the death of a child that you thought was going to grow up and be the way you always thought about. All your dreams for this kid—you know, marriage, the whole bit—none of that is going to happen, and it all turns so suddenly. It finally hits you: All the dreams you had all the time he was growing up are gone forever, and he’ll be a part of a life that is apart from yours and that you can never know. (Mother P)

The dreams that they understood to be a part of an adolescent’s development suddenly seemed irrelevant to their child’s circumstances and the memories of their own adolescence. They recognized that many of the milestones that mark a parent’s and a child’s life would not occur as envisioned, and in realizing this had a strong sense of disappointment:

You prepare for them being teenagers and all that’s supposed to happen. You plan for when they’ll start dating and all that, and yeah, it’s exciting to see them grow up. I guess it has something to do with yourself and reliving stuff. Everything has different meaning now. It’s like nothing will ever be the same. We’ll look at birthdays, graduations, dreams for a wedding all different now. And it feels like you’re missing something really big. (Father N)

Acquainted with no other “like parents” (of gay or lesbian adolescents) and believing that no one could truly understand who had not experienced this with his or her own adolescent left all of the parents feeling a profound sense of loss and existential aloneness:

The unique quality to this grieving is that the world at large is not compassionate—they don’t understand. It’s not like I can talk to people about this. No one understands. You don’t get support. It’s a loss that you, in the end, experience very alone. I wanted to cry with other parents feeling like me. At first, there was no one. (Mother M)

Thinking about their adolescents wanting to dress or gesture in ways that would attract same-sex individuals was equated with the desire to be of the opposite gender. Drawing on the singular stereotypes of gay men and lesbians from the era in which they grew up, this cohort of parents was consumed with shame pertaining to transgender identity as well as sexual identity. Even for the mothers and fathers who had recognized their adolescent’s cross-gender qualities since early childhood, dress and appearance that crossed the lines of socially dictated gender prescriptions were precipitants for heightened anxiety and discouragement. There was the enduring hope that as the child matured, these odd features would become integrated with their biological gender assignment, thereby preserving their womanhood or manhood. Re-encountering these concerns after disclosure raised the same internalized biases and emerged as a source of shame and embarrassment for fathers and mothers alike, regardless of the gender of their children.

Emotional Detachment

I can’t stop the thoughts I have about homosexuality. This is what I’ve learned and what I believe. And now these apply to my child. It’s awful to have these thoughts about one of your children. And I think that’s what the depression and drinking was about. I felt so torn by all the awful thoughts I had about the child I loved. And I shut down from her and felt so empty. (Mother M)

The period following disclosure was a time of unremitting, internalized homophobic messages and the realization that the target of the disparaging thoughts was their own child. As the cognitive schema collided with loving thoughts for the
child, parents found themselves locked in an internal conflict, creating disruption to the parent-child connection. The cognitive imagery of same-gender sexual activity framed by societal inferences of deviance lay at the core of the emotional discord. For the fathers, the most difficult aspect of knowing was the worry that their sons would not live out their lives as “real men,” tying maleness and manhood to heterosexual practice.

The mothers organized their thinking about personal and sexual identities out of the male-dominated, heterosexist values of their culture; adherence to these values reinforced images of lesbian women wanting to be men and same-gender attraction and romantic intimacy as deviant. All of the parents, regardless of length of time suspected or time from disclosure, struggled with coming to terms with their adolescents’ romantic involvement with people of the same gender:

My family, the church, everywhere—you were given the message that being gay was bad. It was about women performing unnatural acts with each other. It wasn’t anything you’d ever think about for someone in your family. It is considered a sin. And just because some people are now saying it’s alright doesn’t mean that it is. I haven’t stopped loving my daughter. That’s the hard part. And I didn’t know how to reconcile this. So far, it hasn’t been easy to find a way to live with this. (Mother Y)

Under the stress of the cognitive-emotional discord, parents found themselves retreating from routine activities, social exposure, and participation in their children’s lives, leaving them to feel detached from their children and depressed.

Fears of Estrangement
Parenting a gay adolescent felt like a daunting undertaking to all of the parents despite their gender or that of their child. Devoid of knowledge of what it means to be gay, these parents felt at a loss as to how they would maintain a place in their child’s life as she or he stepped into the gay world:

Now with all of this, I feel like we really are different. I think we both feel like we’re on opposite sides of the mountain, and I don’t feel like I know him anymore. I can’t imagine understanding what his life will be like, and it’s scary to think that you can be this different from your own child—that you will never completely know his world—and what will that do to your relationship. (Father N)

All of the parents spoke of their fears of losing their child to a subculture that they could never be a part of. In these fears of estrangement was the recognition that they would not be able to serve as role models and teachers of life as parents typically do, because of the differences that stood as a seemingly impermeable barrier between themselves and their adolescent sons and daughters.

Adjustment and Education
I was fortunate enough to have met this person—to take me along—to teach me all that I did not know. It comes to a point you need to have someone who will sit with you when you’re having the hard time and talk, and it has to be someone who can tell you firsthand what it’s been like to be gay. (Mother J)

Wrestling with how to continue parenting children after learning about their gay or lesbian orientation was the dilemma encountered by all of the parents. For those who believed they had taken some positive steps toward adjustment, it appears that adaptively managing the heightened emotions and anxieties was strongly tied to gaining information through exposure. The primary structures for helping them overcome their emotional anguish was knowing someone gay and meeting other parents of gay and lesbian adolescents.

Becoming acquainted with a gay adult was what most dramatically shifted three of the parents’ course of adjustment. The two mothers who had suspected their sons were gay for many years and one of the fathers who knew a gay acquaintance before his son’s disclosure sought out members of the gay community to help them understand what it means to be gay and to see firsthand how gay and lesbian people “turn out.” These parents credited their gay mentors for lifting them from their despair by modeling for them a set of normative parenting expectancies. Personally knowing a gay adult helped to diminish fears of the unknown and began to restore a sense of connection to their children.

All of the parents acknowledged their desire to meet other parents going through the same experience but found scarce resources in their communities. Moreover, the disappointment that
came for those few who did attend local support groups and found only parents of gay and lesbian adults, or those who had worked through the adjustment and become gay activists, only exacerbated their feelings of aloneness. Connecting to a parent cohort that shared the coming out of children at adolescence was viewed as critically important. Those who were further out from disclosure also identified being able to give support to other parents in the same situation as an important aspect of their own adjustment process.

Discussion

As the inference of validity in phenomenological research suggests, confidence in the understanding of the lived experience (Polkinghorne, 1989), diligent adherence to the rigors of phenomenological analysis, and proficiency in social work interpretation were essential components for ensuring accurate understanding of the parents' experience. The rigorous process of pouring over the raw data of each interview for contextual translation and tracking and comparing emergent themes demonstrated a high level of credibility in the study. Backtracking the steps of the analysis to verify the association of themes found in the final description with those of the raw data (Polkinghorne, 1989) proved to be highly reflective of the thematic structures common to the individual protocols. Reliability in phenomenology is the underlying test of whether the research can provide increased insight into the phenomenon and establish a thematic coherence with other research pertaining to the topic (Churchill, Lowerey, McNally, & Rao, 1998). The findings of this study provide new understanding about the experiences of parents of adolescents where there had been none before, establish a coherent connection to findings with parents at later developmental stages, and corroborate the concerns emerging from research with gay and lesbian adolescents.

Disclosure as a Defining Moment

The moment of disclosure is a defining moment in the life of the parent, dividing the parenting experience into two distinct eras. All of the parents spoke of their deep sadness and disappointment that their son or daughter would not live out the life that they had imagined for them or for themselves. It was as if an integral aspect of their own personhood had been cut out of their lives, leaving them feeling profound emptiness and sadness.

For those who carried strong suspicions throughout childhood, it appears that the gradual accumulation of awareness positively supported their adjustment after disclosure in adolescence. The two mothers who suspected that their sons might be gay since early childhood moved more fluidly into the adjustment process than others. It appears that their years of speculation prepared them for the disclosure and strengthened their capacity to seek support in the earliest moments after their adolescent's coming out. They looked for mentors to help them understand their adolescent's experience and manage their emotions. Despite the despair, their sense of connection to their adolescents remained intact throughout the crisis. This finding was contrary to that of Herdt and Koff (2000), who noted that parents who had carried long-standing suspicions before disclosure had a more difficult time adjusting; they attributed this to realizing the demise of long-standing hopes that their suspicions would be untrue.

The Parenting Disconnect

Although feelings of deep sadness and loss emerged, corroborating previous literature about family response to disclosure (Borhek, 1988; Collins & Zimmerman, 1983; De Vine, 1984; Griffin, Wirth, & Wirth, 1996; Herdt & Koff, 2000; Robinson et al., 1989) and consistent with parenting literature pertaining to loss of the idealized child (Bristor, 1984; Fajardo, 1987), the more prominent deterrent to adjustment with parents of gay adolescents was the persistent state of emotional turmoil (or cognitive and emotional dissonance; Boxer et al., 1991) that ensued when parents tried to assimilate the deluge of negative images of homosexuality with the deeply ingrained, loving thoughts carried for their child. The anguish produced by this emotionally disorganizing process caused parents to withdraw socially and disengage from parenting functions; this disconnection produced a state of dysphoria. Whereas guilt stemming from parent self-blame was a prominent finding in the literature with parents of gay adults, it was their detachment in the midst of child rearing that evoked feelings of parenting failure with parents of adolescents.

Uppermost in all of the parents' thoughts was whether their child's essential gender identity might shift as a result of claiming a gay identity. Although Ben-Ari (1995) noted that parents felt
more responsible for the sexual identity outcome of offspring of the opposite gender, and Herdt and Koff (2000) found that parents of both genders had more difficulty accepting a daughter as lesbian than a son as gay, the findings of this study highlight the disrupted self-identifying processes of parents with same-gender adolescent gay or lesbian children. The middle-adulthood process of relating to an adolescent offspring based on the shared experience of being of like gender (Silverberg & Steinberg, 1987), particularly in terms of remembering the salient features of one's own adolescence (Silverberg, 1996), becomes a more disorganizing process for parents when they learn that their adolescent is gay or lesbian. Feeling outside the sphere of experience of these adolescents further exacerbates the parents' sense of detachment. In keeping with parenting theory that postulates that the reappraisal experience for parents with adolescent children of the same sex is a more intensified process (Silverberg & Steinberg), these parents in the active state of parenting reflected a stronger sense of confusion, ego insult, and personal loss relative to gender sameness between parent and child.

Reorganizing the Parenting Structure

Because the lives of adolescent children are inextricably intertwined with those of parents, the adolescents' coming out becomes the parents' coming out as well (Boxer et al., 1991) and configures the new lens through which parents view their world. Recognizing and accepting their own personal and social identity as the parent of a gay or lesbian adolescent would seem to partner with discovering how to parent the developmental, social, and psychological needs of the adolescent. The “normative expectedness” (Menaghan, as cited in Seltzer & Ryff, 1994, p. 14) of parenting at adolescence takes on different meaning relative to the adolescent's emerging gay identity. The findings speak to the process of reorganizing the parenting structure at adolescence at three levels to preserve the integrity of the parent-child connection and reaffirm positive parent self-regard: (1) adapting to sons or daughters as gay or lesbian, (2) adapting to one's own identity as the parents of a gay or lesbian adolescent, and (3) adapting the social context of adolescence to include gay and lesbian adolescents.

Coming to know a gay individual as mentor and teacher emerged as significant to the adjustment progression (supporting Ben-Ari's [1995] and Herdt and Koff's [2000] assertions that knowing someone gay or lesbian before disclosure aides the adjustment process) and an important consideration for responsive interventions. As role models, gay mentors help parents with this adaptation process. For parents who have not had contact with the gay community, a mentoring relationship can bring about the first realization that being gay is not synonymous with deviance or immorality. Embodied in the mentoring relationship is the unconscious process of deconstructing previously held images about gay men and lesbians and reconstructing new meaning. A restored sense of knowing what might lie ahead for an offspring and finding ways to participate in their child's life after their coming out provides the link for reconnection and the opportunity for parent reaffirmation. Reconstituting themselves in their parenting roles facilitates the adjustment progression.

The comfort of meeting others who share similar experiences also presents as promising support to these parents, corroborating the well-documented merits of support group participation for parents of adult gay men and lesbians (Neisen, 1987) and other populations. The opportunity to be with a parent cohort that understands firsthand what it is like parenting a gay or lesbian adolescent and not feel as if they have to have it all worked through is critically important.

Limitations

The primary limitation in this phenomenological study was that the sample was a nonrepresentative fraction of the parents who are experiencing the circumstances of learning that an adolescent child is gay or lesbian. There was no racial or significant socioeconomic diversity among the parents. The inability to secure participation of parents of minority racial and ethnic groups may be related to the reporting by many gay and lesbian minority ethnic and racial group youths that they are not "out" to their parents because of cultural restraints and sanctions. Research with samples more heterogeneous in race and socioeconomic characteristics might discern themes and meaning that did not emerge in this study. Examining this phenomenon as it exists for parents of other racial and ethnic groups should uncover additional perspectives and layers of understanding essential for identifying interventions of support.
Implications for Social Work Practice

These parents' voices resonated with the profound significance attached to learning that their adolescent is gay or lesbian. Diminishing the meaning it holds for them or comparing them with parents of adult children or with others at different points of adjustment were perceived as nonempathic and may reinforce feelings of aloneness and isolation.

Program initiatives for community education through forums, parent workshops, and written materials have the potential to socially construct new meaning about family identity for all parents and families, thereby establishing the normative coexistence of being gay or raising a gay adolescent along with the array of other possibilities inherent in the parenting and family experience. Initiatives such as this can provide the opportunity for societal reimagining of an oppressed group, thereby supporting healthy and positive individual family reimagining of adolescent and parent identities. Helping to restructure the cognitive and emotional schemas that influence how parents respond to their gay and lesbian adolescents and how they view themselves as parents influences how adolescents who identify as gay and lesbian are perceived by society.

Another aspect to innovative programming might also look to the formation of a social services structure for helping parents of gay and lesbian adolescents find gay and lesbian adult mentors and for serving as a referral source (for support groups, therapists with proven expertise in this area, and other parents with gay or lesbian adolescents who have volunteered to be peer supports). As the social work profession takes a leadership role in helping to socially reconstruct cultural legacies that devalue and marginalize gay men and lesbians, social work practitioners should help parents restore their experiences as parents of adolescents growing into their gay and lesbian identities.

References


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