CHILDREN’S EXPERIENCES WITH PARENT’S DISCLOSURE OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION: BLENDED FAMILIES IN NONHETERONORMATIVE CONTEXTS

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This study seeks to examine the dynamics of blended families in non-heteronormative contexts. The goal of the research was to gain a better understanding of the experiences of children who grew up raised in a “normative” family – in which there were two parental figures of the opposite sex coparenting together for a significant portion of their childhood and/or adolescence – transitioning to living in a blended family with a new parental figure or stepparent figure of the same sex as their parent, along with their possible family members. A great deal of the existing literature on blended families bases findings on studies whose subjects are heterosexual, married couples and their young children. This leaves out a large portion of individuals, neglecting valuable information. The following study is an effort to take steps towards filling this gap, representing those whose life experience exists outside of this particular, normative family shape. Though every family is different, and this particular life event has a different effect on each individual experiencing it, subjects in this study largely reflected the following conclusions regarding nonheteronormative families. Support systems, especially those that involved siblings, were significant in the respondents’ lives. They gave stability in potentially traumatic or sudden circumstances. Additionally, parent-child relationships and partner-child relationships were impacted substantially in various ways. Not because of family members being unsupportive, but instead because parents are often cautious about proceeding with their new relationship, anticipating that their children or other loved ones could interfere with it.
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My mom and dad first told me that their relationship was ending and that they would be separating when I was fifteen years old. Though it was saddening, I had friends whose parents were divorced and knew other family members who had been divorced. So, while I had yet to have any direct personal experience with divorce, I vaguely understood what it meant and how it might affect my family. It wasn’t truly surprising. What did surprise me was when at eighteen years old, my mom sat me and my sister down for the first time since my parents’ separation to tell us that she was seeing someone. Curious about this new person in her life, we piled on the questions: “Do we know him?” “How did you meet?” “Who is he?” To which she replied, “it’s not a ‘he’.” That was how my mom came out to us.

Since then, I have shared the time I spend home equally split between my dad’s house and my mom’s, which we now share with her partner and her partner’s two twin daughters. It has happened more than once that I have told someone about my family for the first time and they respond with something to the effect of “that sounds like a movie” or “you should write a book”. It is also usually accompanied with invasive questions about my mom’s sexual orientation, asking how she identifies, if it has made me question my own identity, how we function as a household with only women living in it – all of which indicating that they find my family situation strange. I had this strangeness confirmed for me when I took my first sociology class at Tulane – Sociology of Family. We were doing a unit on divorce, remarriage and blended families, for which all of the literature we read was exclusive to heterosexual relationships. I found none of it to be particularly emblematic of my own experiences with these themes in my own family,
having a stepmother-like figure instead of a stepfather. I chose to conduct my own study to interview people with similar experiences to my own, in the hopes of taking a crucial step towards filling this research gap.
Table of Contents

Abstract......................................................................................................................... ii

Acknowledgments........................................................................................................ iii

Preface.......................................................................................................................... iv

Introduction................................................................................................................... 1

Literature Review.......................................................................................................... 2

  Family as an Institution............................................................................................... 2

  Blended Families......................................................................................................... 5

  The Perspective of a Loved One.................................................................................. 6

  Parents’ Disclosure of Sexuality.................................................................................. 7

Methodology.................................................................................................................. 10

Results............................................................................................................................. 13

  When and How Parents Choose to Disclose............................................................... 13

  Child’s Thoughts on Parent’s Sexuality Before and After Coming Out............... 14

  Aftermath of Coming Out........................................................................................... 15

  Change in Parent-Child Relationship......................................................................... 17

  Evolution of Partner-Child Relationship................................................................. 18

  Blending Families....................................................................................................... 19

  Support Systems......................................................................................................... 22

Discussion....................................................................................................................... 25

References...................................................................................................................... 29

Appendices..................................................................................................................... 32
Introduction

Our families provide us with our first introduction to the world. They establish culture and morality as well as begin to shape our views and our perspective of our environment. The process of reproducing social patterns through the passing of information unto new generations is universal and makes family a universal foundational social structure and crucial to societies around the globe (Waite 2000). Each person matures under a specific set of circumstances that is unique to us as individuals, and a major change in family – negative, positive or neutral – can quickly upheave one’s understanding of the world and make us question that which we believe we know. This study is an investigation into a specific manifestation of this occurrence in which a child who has grown up in a “normative” family with one mother and one father has to transition into a family not fitting a traditional shape in which one parent has come out as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, with which one’s parents’ potential partners, blended families and other accompaniments may follow. The goal of this research is to gain an accurate understanding of the experiences of adult children who have had a parent come out to them. While this family life event is likely to be as unique as the individual with the experience, the importance of unearthing the knowledge that can be gleaned from nonheteronormative blended families (who have not typically been at the forefront sociological scholarship) cannot be overstated, as a highly under researched family setting. The main purpose of this research is to fill this gap, representing an overlooked and possibly misunderstood type of family.

The conflict that divorce or separation of a child’s parents creates, at any point in their life, is a significant psychological and social event and can be distressing (Harvey
and Fine 2004). It often presents a new living situation, maybe new family members, not to mention a new view on one’s family and on life in general. Now, add to this the newly gained knowledge that a substantial aspect of one of your parent’s identity is not at all what you once believed it to be. Not only does the child, regardless of their age, have to come to terms with the fact that their family no longer looks or feels the same as it once did, but that it possibly was never supposed to be that way. Oftentimes, when a person has difficulty accepting a person coming out as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, it is attributed to bigotry. But a child’s difficulty accepting a parent who has come out may have nothing to do with biases or prejudices against the LGBTQ+ community but instead may have more to do with the fact that a parent who they thought they knew just revealed something substantial to them. The acceptance of a parent’s sexuality may be more or less unrelated to how the child feels about LGBTQ+ people generally and instead have more to do with what the implications of them coming out means for their family and how they now have to reconfigure the mental image they have of their family.

**Literature Review**

**Family as an Institution**

Social institutions can be evaluated “by deciding on what we value about them and then assessing the extent to which they produce what we value and under what circumstances they do” (Waite 2000:463). Fitting this description, families are the foremost prominent social institution that has an impact on our lives. It has been theorized that that families have a dominant idealized schema, known as the Standard North American Family (SNAF). It is an “ideological code” in that it appears as
organized behavior that replicates itself through and across generations in various settings (Smith 1999:159). While SNAF is reflective of social norms and ideations of the appearance and shape of a family, it also dictates the moral value of a family. Using the principals put forth by the concept, we can deduce that a “good” family has at least the following: one adult man married to one adult woman who live together in an owned house with a potential few children. Ideally, the man is the primary “breadwinner”, bringing in the majority of the family income and taking on the role of the provider. The woman may work if she chooses to do so, though her primary priorities are those concerning the upkeep of the household – maintaining the physical space of the home and providing care for its occupants and making her the family caretaker. Families that do deviate from the structure that SNAF puts forth are “othered” in society with varying degrees of severity, the consequences being contingent upon which imperatives a family violates. For example, it could be considered more socially acceptable to violate the rule that dictates that a man be a primary breadwinner for a household than to violate that which dictates that a relationship is between two adults, as opposed to three or more. While it presents as the norm in a dominant culture, there are not many families in reality that perfectly fit this model presented to us.

As a form of social organization, family requires structure. One of the most common forms of creating this structure, as a binding legal agreement, is marriage. In certain schools of thought, the act of legally binding yourself to another adult is a form of financial insurance, a safety net of sorts. This is what is sometimes called a “risk-spreader” (Waite 2015:766). The economics of marriage assure that all members of the family are provided for, decreasing the cost of living overall, as it is more costly to live
separately than together. Historically, marriage also aided in making political advantages and ensured a family’s future economic success (Coontz 2004). This method, however, is no longer just limited to married folks. More people now are choosing alternatives to the traditional shape of a family. This includes cohabitating (sharing a living space with a person that one is not married to) with partners, choosing single parenthood, even living with other non-related adults in a non-romantic context. In recent decades, despite not being the norm, cohabitation has in fact become a much more popular alternative to married cohabitation, with the rates having risen from 0.1% mid-20th century and maintaining its rate of 30% today (Spanier 1983) (Lundberg, Pollack and Stearns 2016) (U.S. Census Bureau 2018). The prevalence of cohabitation had become so great that many believed marriage to be a dying trend and has now even gone so far as to say that it might be considered a necessary step for a person to take with their romantic partner in preparation for marriage, as most relationships in which cohabitation takes place either end or evolve into marriage (Coontz 2004) (Sassler and Miller). Reasons for the commonness of cohabitation vary, though a key reasoning involves the failure of marriage to maintain economic advantage. Historically, married couples have received benefits from the state, from employers and in other private sectors (Badgett 2010). In more recent years, due to technological advancement in the home and workplace, a marriage contract has less value (Lundberg, Pollack, and Stearns 2016). This occurrence has redefined the standards for who we can consider family members. Simultaneously, cohabitation has blurred some of the lines between family and not family, a phenomenon known as family boundary ambiguity (Brown and Manning 2009). This leaves much
room for individuals to delineate whether they consider the people with whom they live to be “official” family members or not.

**Blended Families**

Though blended families look vastly different from household to household, it remains constant that they result from at least one partner in a cohabitating couple having had at least one child from a previous relationship (Ganong and Coleman 2004). Meaning, children may now find themselves sharing a home with an unrelated adult and potential unrelated children. Creating a blended family is about more than just the relationship between the adults. The interconnection between all involved individuals is also meaningful when it comes to understanding notions of family (Allan, et al. 2011). These connections are informed by prior family structured experienced before the formation of their blended family, which can often result in a purposefully kept distance between stepchild and stepparent (Pylyser et al. 2018) (Baxter et al. 2004). Cultural notions of family may also play a role in straining relationships between stepfamily members, as they would dictate that stepfamily members are secondary to biological family members (Pylyser et al. 2018). This is what influences many of the behaviors of those within the family, creating a dichotomy between trying to model a closeness that is considered typical of a biological nuclear family and also maintaining a level of distance between stepchildren (who may not want or need another authority figure in their lives) and their stepparent. However, it still remains true that there is a range in experiences of how cultural family values manifest in blended families. Despite the possibility of there
being a tension in these relationships, many children do desire to have or actually have a closeness to their stepparent (Baxter et al. 2004).

The Perspective of the Loved One

Typically, when studying disclosure of sexuality, or “coming out”, the individual doing the disclosing is the one researched, especially with regard to the psychological or social implications of their coming out. It is rare that the friends and family of the newly “out” individual is viewed as bearing significant weight in the phenomenon, other than as it is perceived by the person coming out. Kelley (2021) acknowledges the importance of support to transgender family members while also emphasizing the importance of exploring how their loved ones navigate their transition and coming out. In their study interviewing family members of transgender individuals, they note (2021:626) that “all members of a family with a transitioning person may be transitioning together”. In other words, one person’s coming out can and often does have a significant impact on all members of the family.

Kelley’s findings included a universal theme among the subjects who verbalized wanting to show their support throughout their trans loved one’s transition, despite some not having much prior understanding of what being transgender means. The relationship shared between the trans person and their loved one was found to be more important to the loved one than the possible discomfort or unfamiliarity with their identity as a trans person. Being that these people are the ones who make up the support systems of trans people and the LGBTQ+ community in general, understanding their experiences is crucial to creating a more wide-ranging supportive society. The same can be said of the
loved ones for all people in the LGBTQ+ community, all of whom require an emotional and mental support system.

Parents Disclosure of Sexuality

The act of disclosing one’s sexual orientation to another person is commonly referred to as “coming out of the closet” or simply “coming out”. With “coming out” originally referring to young women being presented to their communities as debutantes (often symbolizing exclusivity and high society), the phrase had been reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community as code to let others know of their identity without putting their themselves at risk of being discriminated against or stigmatized (Lewis and Page 2012) (Orne 2011). This potential threat of isolation or physical harm heavily impacts an individual’s emotional and mental state and can prevent or delay coming out, as it has been established as a significant decision an individual can make, bearing emotional, psychological and social consequences (LaSala 2010). It has been found to be most difficult for children to come out to parents, over all others they might wish to disclose to (Heatherington and Lavner 2008). There are several key factors which affect the outcome of the disclosure itself. Of those, the quality of the relationship between a parent and a child has proven to be one of the most significant. In most instances, the higher the quality of parent-child relationships the greater the likelihood of disclosure to parents yielding a more positive and accepting reaction from them. An inversion of this situation could also be assumed to be true: that high quality parent-child relationships would yield better reactions from the child when a parent discloses their
sexuality to them. Though this still begs the question: what might this interaction look like for a parent coming out to their child?

While the experiences of children in nonheteronormative blended families have flown under the radar of most sociological research, the phenomenon of having a parent come out later in life has been acknowledged in Diana Breshears and Carien Lubbe-De Beer’s study (2014). They interviewed 20 adult children who, at some point, had a parent come out to them. They were asked to share the story of how their parent came out to them and to also give advice for parents anticipating coming out to their children. Breshears and Lubbe-De Beer identified three stages that a parent should deliberate when planning to disclose their sexuality: (1) before coming out, (2) during the conversation, (3) after coming out. Each stage contains specific advice from the surveyed subjects with the overall goal of maintaining an open and honest relationship between child and parent who also had a positive relationship prior to the parent’s disclosure of their sexuality.

The before-coming-out requirements that these children had largely centered on having trust in the relationship a parent has with their child, with one of the main pieces of advice being to “give the child credit” (2014:233). In essence, the parent must have faith that whatever the child’s reaction is, they will be able to adapt after being presented with this new information about their parent and continue their previously positive relationship. The “before” also demands a level of confidence from the parent. Confidence both in their identity and in ability to share their identity with their child before they themselves ask about it. While Breshears and Lubbe-De Beer’s findings seem to reflect the idea that children have the emotional maturity to respond appropriately to
having these kinds of conversations, it also posits the parent are the one in control of the discussion and puts the responsibility on them to relay the necessary information.

Possibly the most emotionally demanding of the three stages, unsurprisingly, is the conversation itself. According to the empirical advice, there are two main requirements of the parent: honesty and acceptance. Given that it was common for children to suspect before their parent told them definitively what was going on, most of the respondents were in agreement that it was better for parents to be completely open when opening up the conversation. Their findings also recognize that “complete acceptance of the parents’ sexual orientation is a process that takes time”. Parents should be prepared for multiple scenarios and reactions on the part of the child, noting that their possible difficulty with the new information should not immediately be attributed to prejudice (though they acknowledge that this is also a possibility) (2014:235).

The “after-the-conversation” component of the respondents’ advice had been identified as being last stage, but it is not truly final. The last-listed stage reflects a small part of an ongoing process as the respondents advise parents to find and participate in a larger community of others with shared experiences, stating the importance of finding support and “incorporat[ing] that support into the family unit” (2014:237). Not only will this piece of advice allow the child to not feel as abnormal or as isolated in navigating what it means to have a parent come out to them, but it will also help them combat the possible new discrimination they face as the child of an LGBTQ-identifying person.

While this advice may be reflective of these 20 individuals’ initial exposure to having a parent come out to them, it does not fully encompass the lived experience of continuing to exist in a queer blended family, following their parents’ disclosure,
including the process of accepting their parent’s sexuality, making peace with cohabitating with new family members, as well as dealing with a form of coming out themselves (albeit on a much smaller scale) in telling others about their family. This is what I hope to uncover by furthering the conversation with the respondents of this study. What comes after the disclosure? What can we learn from children who have experienced being a part of both a “normative” family and one in which there is a newly out parent?

**Methodology**

*Participants*

For this research study, the sample consisted of 9 people who were eighteen years of age or older and are children of parents who came out to them later in life (see Appendix C). The use of the phrasing “later in life” is purposefully ambiguous to encompass the experiences of those whose parents came out at some point in their life after having been in a heterosexual-presenting relationship for at least the beginning of the respondent’s life. The respondents themselves determined their own eligibility to meet these criteria after reading the consent form which outlined the requirements. Only after asserting that they met these criteria did we proceed with the interview. Given that the population being studied is difficult to find (not everyone would immediately disclose such information about their family to someone they do not know well), both convenience sampling and snowball sampling were utilized to recruit a satisfactory sample. The researcher’s personal contacts that met the criteria were contacted to begin the recruitment process, using the knowledge of who might fit the criteria or who might know of someone who fits the criteria, then providing contact information to potential
subjects to then reach out of their own accord if interested in participating. Contact with the potential subjects then took place through email. When it was determined that the potential subject met the criteria previously laid out, they were then asked to participate in an interview. Respondents in the study were then asked to identify potential other subjects who meet the same criteria.

Procedure

The data for this research study was collected from 9 semi-structured video and audio recorded interviews conducted via Zoom. Due to the uniqueness of individuals’ experiences with the situation and the lack of prior research on the subject, this was the most effective method to gather this information. Interviews also allowed for the richest and greatest amount of data to be collected as respondents were able to go into great detail about their families and experiences in them. These interviews were conducted after having obtained an expedited review and approval determination from Tulane University Social-Behavioral IRB in accordance with appropriate research regulations (see Appendix D).

Data Collection

For this study, I interviewed 9 individuals who had a parent come out to them later in life (n = 9). These individuals were selected using a snowball sampling method. I began with personal contacts and then asked subsequent respondents in their interview if they knew of anyone that would be interested in participating in the study. If they did know of someone, it was encouraged that they reach out to me to participate in an interview. There were times when a respondent would provide me with the contact information of another potential subject, in which case I would reach out to them via
email using the approved recruitment script. All interaction with respondents took place virtually. The respondents and I utilized email to schedule the interviews and Zoom video conferencing to conduct them. The interviews were audio and video recorded to allow the researcher to analyze both the words of the respondent and their facial expressions and body language. Having access to these visual elements increased understanding and cross-validation of the nuances of respondents’ answers. Permission for the interview to be audio and video recorded was obtained using a consent form, which the respondent was able to read themselves using Zoom’s “share screen” feature. Their verbal consent was also recorded.

The anonymity and privacy of the respondents was of the utmost importance in this study. As such, names have been changed, and pseudonyms will be used in their place to ensure protection of the respondents’ identities. After transcribing the interviews, the recorded files were encrypted in a password-protected folder for possible future use in related research. The anticipated time commitment of the respondent was communicated to be up to one hour, though most did not go the full length of time, averaging around forty minutes in length.

Respondents were asked to describe specific occurrences in their lives in detail as well about their relationships to individual family members and to describe their emotions regarding those relationships. All respondents had the right to refuse to answer particular questions and to withdraw consent to participate at any time. The questions being asked (including guiding follow up questions) of interviewees are shown in Appendix B.

Data Analysis
Given that the research question being explored is general and largely exploratory, emergent coding was used to identify and categorize the data from the transcribed interviews. This coding strategy allows me to identify and develop themes as the study moves forward in its progression.

**Results**

There were seven themes that emerged from and were identified in the respondents’ experiences.

**When and How Parents Choose to Disclose**

There were three foremost events that were identified in respondents’ experiences with their parent’s disclosure: their parent’s divorce and/or separation from their other parent, their parent’s actual disclosure of their sexuality, and the introduction of a new partner. The timing of all of these events varied across the board. Some parents used their separation and/or divorce to disclose their sexuality, some used the disclosure of their sexuality to introduce their new partner, while some respondents’ experience was that all three occurred at once. Those whose parents chose to use their sexuality to explain the reason for divorce also typically reported fewer negative effects, or even an amicable effect on the former couple’s relationship. Those whose parents came out after their divorce or separation more commonly felt more negative feelings towards their parent for not doing it sooner, as was the case with Daniel and Evelyn. It was the most common occurrence, though, that a parent would separate from their other parents and then later come out and introduce their new partner at the same time, with five of the respondents reporting that this was the case for them. Two reported their parent separating and
coming out at the same time, then later re-partnering, while the remaining two reported
these none of these three events coincided with each other and that they occurred on
three entirely separate occasions.

Child’s Thoughts on Parent’s Sexuality Before and After Coming Out

Before

As with any big news, feelings of surprise, shock or even initial discomfort could
be expected and understandable. In talking to respondents, however, it turns out that there
was only one (the youngest at the time of disclosure) who did not report having a prior
suspicion. Most had a suspicion or had even just assumed that their parent was a member
of the LGBTQ+ community, with about 5 conveying feeling as though their parent’s
disclosure of their sexuality was something of a puzzle piece that they had not realized
had been missing. It made more sense to them once they had verbal confirmation from
their parent, and two of them went as far as to say that they knew well before their parent
said the words out loud. Ivan described having met his mother’s partner several times and
seeing them interact together often before receiving confirmation that they were a couple.
When his mother finally did verbalize that they were romantic partners, he found the
experience humorous. “It was a very sweet moment. I still think about it very fondly.
They were just so obvious, it was hilarious.”

After

Not all of the interviewees had such positive experiences with the news. Daniel
noted feeling angry at their parent for having waited so long to share this with them and
for also not realizing it sooner. “I thought ‘why didn’t you know this before getting
married to mom?”. He later clarified that while he was somewhat resentful, he also felt relief and happy for his father no longer “living a lie”. He also found that his father coming out worked in his favor as well, as he had been contemplating how to disclose his own sexuality to his family and friends around that same time. He found working through his resentment was impacted by thinking of his father as being in the same shoes as him. The resentment towards a parent was shared by Evelyn who felt slighted that her mother kept the fact that she was bisexual a secret for so long.

Aftermath of Coming Out

Family Members

All respondents stated that, generally speaking, their family members were supportive of their parent. There were some, as in the cases of Daniel, Evelyn and Ivan, who had at least one family member that was not supportive or at least a family member who was speculated to not be entirely on board with their parent coming out or with their new partner but also stated that those people were also quiet about their lack of support instead of outwardly judgmental.

Ex-Partner

Upon being asked if their parent’s ex-partner was supportive of them coming out, most respondents voiced a lack of care for whether one parent approved of the other’s sexuality/new partner, though still discussed it. Abigail, whose father had recently come out, said of her mother “I think she was the most relieved of anyone [that he finally felt comfortable enough to come out]” iterating that her mother just wanted him to be happy.
Additionally, she also said of her mother “if they could have an open marriage, she would be willing to still live together and co parent as a couple.”

Harriet responded to the question by simply saying that it was none of her father’s business what her mother now chose to do in her romantic life but that she was glad for his support (albeit unenthusiastic) anyway because it made their life as a family easier with them getting along.

Gabrielle, whose mother came out three years after the end of her previous marriage, recalled her father’s attitude change with regard to his personal feelings about the LGBTQ+ community. “He never cared who was gay, but then when mom came out…he was really angry about it”. When asked if she could speculate why her father felt this way, she answered that she presumed he felt lied to.

**Peers/Friends**

All respondents noted that their own friends were also supportive of their parent coming out, with two of them even stating that they had friends who would like to be invited to their parent’s and new partner’s wedding. The same joy was not necessarily shared with the peers of the respondents. Abigail recounted attending a party in high school with peers who she did not consider close friends. “Now that [my parents] were finally divorced… peers of mine thought it was okay to be like ‘oh, are your parents getting divorced because your dad is gay?’” This was said of him before he had actually come out and was all her peers’ speculation. Abigail remembered finding those comments and questions frustrating, presumptuous and intrusive, as her parents’ relationship and sexuality was none of their business.
Harriet seemed to share this experience. While she claimed that she knew her friends would be supportive of her mother after coming out, she remains cautious about telling other people that she does not know well because she knows that the region in which she lives is more conservative and is known for being exclusive of individuals in the LGBTQ+ community.

**Change in Parent-Child Relationship**

With the addition of a new parental figure, especially in the home, there is often a change in relationship between a child and their newly-out parent. For the respondents in this study, this meant a lot of different things, the range of which cannot be overstated. All of them at least vaguely hinted at feeling like they understood their parent more clearly knowing this piece of information. Some, however, felt as though welcoming a new person into the family had driven a wedge between them. Evelyn recounted not being welcome in her mother’s new house that she moved into with her partner, where previously her mother had wanted her home as much as possible. “Her parenting style has completely done a 180. She doesn’t really want anything to do with us the same way.” This was not an isolated case. Gabrielle said of her mother now that she is “out”, “she’s a lot more preoccupied with her relationship”. Two other interviewees shared that they were now picking up signs that their parents did not want to “mess” with their new life with their partner, instead distancing themselves from their children to preserve a new relationship. Brianna and Harriet both recounted there being a significant adjustment period with their new partners coming into their lives. Though it has lessened with time, Harriet at first felt like she and her family were sacrificing a lot for the comfort of her
mother’s partner. The example that she gave had to do with their family’s way of being in their own home. As a family, they do not mind messes or certain types of foods. When Harriet’s mother brought her partner into their lives, suddenly things had to change based on her preferences. Harriet remembers thinking “why do we have to give so much?” and feeling like the adjustment was one-sided. Overtime, though, it has become more of a compromise and the two families have learned to appreciate the other’s way of living. However, this resolution was not everyone’s experience. Evelyn and her sibling still feel a sort of conflict between them and their mother’s partner. She also said of her mother “My mom does a really good job pretending that she wants to have a good relationship with my sister”. It was frustrating to her that her mother is upset that her relationship with Evelyn’s sister has been damaged but not enough to relinquish pride for the sake of her relationship with her daughter and recognize that what she is feeling towards her new partner is valid.

**Evolution of Partner-Child Relationship**

While all respondents voiced their support of their parent’s coming out, not all were fans of their parent’s new partner. Several interviewees told stories of attempts to build a relationship with their parent’s partner. These stories typically had positive outcomes. The most notable of which is epitomized in Ivan’s experience. His happiness for his mother and her partner shone through as he spoke of the two of them, describing their relationship as “adorable” and “very wholesome”. When describing the feeling he had when he received the news that they were moving in together, he said that he had
been waiting for it to happen for a while. “I was like ‘finally!’”, he exclaimed as he threw his fists up, almost victoriously. He had only good things to say about the pair of them.

Though some partner-child relationships proved more difficult than others. Brianna, while not entirely opposed to her mother’s now-wife, made it clear to the two of them that she did not want to be parented by her in any way. Her condition for giving them her blessing for marrying was that they would all go to therapy together so that she could further explain that condition. Indifference was another descriptor of the partner-child relationship, mainly used by Gabrielle, who repeatedly stated that she did not have much of a relationship at all with her mother’s fiancée. “We’re not involved in each other’s lives that much,” she said when asked about what kinds of things they do together as a family. In addition to the two families having differing values regarding quality time together, Gabrielle attributes the distance between herself and her stepfamily members to the fact that the children living in the house have very different schedules, making it rare to have them all home at one time.

Whether positive, negative, or somewhere in between, it is clear that these individuals have come a long way in the evolution of their relationship with their parent’s partner. And while not all of the respondents were as enthusiastic and as fairytale-like as Ivan’s, all respondents had eventually made their way towards acceptance with regard to their stepparent figure.

**Blending Families**

Upon the introduction of new people into one’s home, there are bound to be a variety of emotions and reactions from all those involved. It is a lengthy process –
physically moving into a new space or having someone else move into your space, changing daily routines to accommodate more people, their habits and preferences, figuring out how to make decisions together – the list goes on.

How it Happened

Harriet’s greatest conflict with her mother’s now fiancée stems from not having been included in the proposal, despite her and her siblings’ involvement initially being planned. Her mother’s partner’s family was present at the proposal and the celebration that followed it, while Harriet and her siblings were notified of its occurrence afterwards. When their engagement was finally announced, she felt happy for them but was also upset about not having been a part of the event. She then felt guilty about not feeling entirely happy about it. This led to a great deal of resentment towards her mother’s partner.

Harriet was not the only one to have felt conflict surrounding the engagement of her parent. When asked for her blessing of the engagement, Brianna stated that she felt pressured into giving it, knowing that it was likely going to happen regardless of if she was on board or not. Gabrielle also reported feeling a kind of pressure to be okay with her mother’s life choices regarding her partner, despite never having been asked for her thoughts about them in any true sense of the word. Her mother did ask for her input when moving in with her partner, but Gabrielle felt that it would not have been taken into consideration anyway.

On the flip side of this scenario, Daniel had the most cohesive family integration of all of the respondents. He detailed his father explaining to him when introducing his partner for the first time that he would only be around as much as Daniel allowed, which
gave him the feeling that he did have some control over the situation and left him feeling more positively overall about his partner.

“Stepsiblings”

Evelyn, as the one with the greatest number of new “stepsiblings” (4 of them, all older than her) arguably could have also had the most frustration with cohabitating with them. Instead, she articulated that she does consider them to be a part of her family but that she also felt alone in that sentiment. “I am happy to feel that way…I don’t think they reciprocate it, but I like to think that they’re a part of my family”. Gabrielle, who still actively lives with her stepsiblings, also reported having little if any connection to them at all. But the respondent with the most negative experience with stepsiblings was by far Ivan, who refused to even say much of her at all. “There’s no love there” he said of his relationship with his “stepsister”, the daughter of his mother’s live-in partner. He attributes the estrangement to his suspicion that she does not approve of their mothers’ relationship, and her belief that his mother is not good enough for hers.

New Additions

Brianna, whose mother’s new wife is a woman 12+ years younger, talked about her stepmom wanting a new baby, having never had children of her own. She stated that she would feel obligated to have a relationship with the child because it is her mom’s child but will likely find the relationship difficult because, in addition to there being a large age gap, she will not live close to home or see them often. As such, she will not get the opportunity to build a significant relationship with her new sibling. Given that she is in a critical stage in life – going to college, establishing herself in the adult world – she will not have the time to go home often to visit her infant sibling. They did ask her if it
was ok to have a new baby, but they did not ask Hannah’s brother for permission, despite him still living at home with them and having the potential to have a closer relationship with the child. This statement came across as a criticism of an oversight on her mother’s part, though she did not elaborate on the implications of the oversight.

When I asked others if their childless stepparent-figure would ever want children of their own, many respondents speculated that they themselves filled the role of child in their new stepparent’s life.

**Support Systems**

Through the separation and/or divorce of their parents and the formation of a new family structure with a same-sex partner, all interviewees acknowledged that they felt some kind of emotional distress in the aftermath of either their parent’s separation or in their coming out. As such, having a system in place for emotional support was important to them.

*Sibling*

Siblings were among the most commonly reported people relied on for support. They are the only ones who might fully be able to fully understand the scope of how these life events affect a person, as they are going through the same thing. All nine of those interviewed had at least one sibling. However, eight of those were the oldest of their siblings. Given this, these respondents found themselves being a source of emotional support for their younger siblings without being able to fully rely on them as well for support.
In true sibling fashion, however, some respondents did not interpret the situation the same way as their brother or sister and therefore did not see eye-to-eye on the situation. Abigail explained that while she felt a close emotional relationship with her two siblings, the age difference between them (with her being the oldest and away at college at the time their father came out) was preventing them from fully supporting each other. “We tried to have each other’s backs, but we were all going through our own coping mechanisms… I think [my brother and sister] really learned to be there for each other because they had to literally take care of my father”.

Evelyn found that she also diverged from her sister in terms of their relationship to their mother and her partner, with Evelyn for the most part being on better terms with the couple out of the two of them.

Cindy, while having reported that she and her brother were both supportive of their father after coming out, also noted that her brother will also sometimes weaponize their father’s sexual orientation against him in the heat of an argument, calling him various names and insults.

Friends

Above all, it seemed that close friends were the most reliable source of support for respondents. All of them at least briefly mentioned having good friends to turn to for emotional support when feeling upset by the conflict of their family’s circumstances.

Professional Mental Health Support

It was a pleasant surprise to hear several of the respondents talk about seeking out professional help for their mental well-being throughout the ups and downs of their family situations. When asked about how they feel supported by others, the mention of
therapists came up more than once. Brianna, Gabrielle, Abigail, Evelyn and Ivan all spoke of having a therapist at least at some point in their lives with the last three being therapy’s biggest advocates. “Therapy’s definitely been a huge help…just being able to develop tools to be in the moment and figure out what’s actually going on… I wish I’d done more therapy earlier. When I was a kid… when all of this really heavy stuff was happening, I didn’t have any understanding of what was going on or how to process it. So, I had to do a lot of post-processing,” Ivan said of his half dozen therapists over his life course. “[They] retroactively helped, but my relationships with people, my self-esteem, all that stuff has been such a rocky road for me because I didn’t have access to that [as a child], and I’ve had to work it out as an adult.” All of these respondents (with the exception of Gabrielle) spoke highly of their therapist(s) and recommended that everyone see one if they have the means to do so.

Respondents’ Identities

There were 5 respondents who identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community themselves. Evelyn had come out prior to her mother as bisexual years before, a fact which exemplified her aforementioned feelings of resentment towards her. She regrets that they missed out on sharing in a moment where they both had come out together. Gabrielle also came out prior to her mother when she was twelve years old (several years before her mother would come out). She said that her mother’s coming out didn’t affect her perception of herself or her identity at all. “I feel like, if anything, my coming out was good for [my mom],” she explained her belief that she set her mother up for success, getting other family members used to the idea of a member of their family being in the
LGBTQ+ community. Another participant, Daniel, felt oppositely and instead expressed that he felt his father’s coming out had made it easier for him to do the same a few months later.

To Parents Who Have Not Yet Come Out

Upon being asked if he had anything further to add at the end of his interview, Daniel offered advice to parents struggling with how to disclose their sexuality to their children and to others. Acknowledging that coming out can be difficult and stress-inducing, the uncertainty of what is going on in the parent’s life, particularly when the child suspects something, “brews a lot of negative emotion” on the part of the child.

Discussion

Of everyone interviewed for this study, all noted that they supported their parent coming out and had either neutral or positive feelings about having a partner of the same gender as them. Many also included that the majority of their family and friends felt similarly in supporting the newly “out” individual. This presents a curious instance in looking at whether different family members will support others who are in the LGBTQ+ community and why they might be unsupportive. Generally speaking, there is a much more common narrative of parents not being accepting of their child after coming out. For children, however, it is rare for them to vocalize not being accepting of their parent coming out. I theorize that this could be because of a few different things.

Firstly, in the narrative that parents may not be supportive of their child coming out, being “disowned” or rejected is often a severe threat to the child who is still living
under their parents’ roof. A child does not hold the same power of their parent. Instead, they are dependent on their parents. So, if their parent comes out as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, they have to get on board or risk losing their caregiver and the support (financial, emotional, etc.) that a parent offers them.

Additionally, if a parent feels comfortable enough to come out to their child, it is likely that they have already expressed support for the LGBTQ+ community. It was the noted by the respondents (the majority of whom identified as a queer person themselves) that being a member of this community was never taught to them by their families as something to be feared or detested. All expressed that their acceptance of queer people began long before their parent came out.

Lastly, my foremost theory in why children seem to be more accepting, is generational differences – something that was also echoed by a few respondents. The age range in respondents for this study revealed an insight into the phenomenon of having a parent come out later in life, which is that our current political and social atmosphere is what allows for it to take place. The oldest interviewee, Ivan, 41 years old, noted that disclosing one’s sexuality to others “wasn’t a thing in the 90s” when his own mother came out to him, at least not to people who were not close family or friends. He knew of his mother’s relationship with her partner, as did a few other close to them, but it was certainly not public knowledge, out of concern for her job, her relationships and her safety. It would appear that while people now can afford to not be secretive about their sexuality, in the past they could not, as seen in Ivan’s mother’s experiences.

Nonheteronormative blended families are a fairly novel family structure, given that they are now being acknowledged as a legitimate family unit. Society today, while still
heteronormative and discriminatory, is undoubtedly more accepting than it was even just a few years ago. People are now able to live their lives more candidly and openly. It is my belief that this phenomenon of having a parent come out later in life will also disappear the more progressive society becomes. Ideally, in a world where non-cishet-identifying people are not othered or stigmatized, people will not have to come out at all. Nor will people have to suppress their attractions in order to fit the traditional familial model that SNAF presents us with.

Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations of the study. The primary one being the small sample size. Given that there were only nine individuals whose experiences were recorded in the study, who all had different stories to share, the findings may not be able to be applied to other samples. The sample was also relatively uniform in that there was little racial and ethnic diversity, with all but one respondent being white. I would predict this to be significant in examining the culture of families and how the various identified themes are faced. Additionally, respondents were being asked to recall events that were typically years in the past when they were at a very young age, which proved difficult at times when they could not recall certain details of their experience. This study also does not acknowledge class to the fullest necessary extent in discussions of cohabitation. This is important because class is often a large determining factor in whether a couple moves in together prior to marriage as well as how soon a couple moves in together (Sassler and Miller 2017).
Furthermore, it was difficult as a researcher to separate my own experience from those shared with me. Having prior personal familiarity with having a parent come out later in life, I carry with me inbuilt presumptions and ideas about the phenomenon, which at times both diverged from and aligned with what was shared by the respondents. Though I held a determination to separate myself from my biases, I found that to be a difficult task as a member of the researched population.

I also regret not fully being able to capture the nuances present in sexuality studies, specifically with regard to specific stigmatizations of bisexual, pansexual or other imprecise, grey-area identities. This is because I was not examining the parents’ identity or sexual orientation. I was examining the impact that it had on their children. It also would not have been appropriate to ask the respondent to speculate about their parent’s sexuality beyond how it was explained to them as the child. Though it would be a much larger task to also incorporate the perspective of the parent on this particular family development, this is something that could be further explored in future applications. I would recommend also that future related research delve further into the evolution of the relationship both between parent and child and between partner and child, as it was significant to all respondents and fundamentally determined the respondents’ emotional state regarding their involved family members.
References


APPENDICES

Appendix A. Interview Recruitment Script

Hello,

    I am a current student at Tulane University working on my senior thesis: “‘Transitionary’ Families: Children’s Experience with Parents “Coming Out” as LGBTQ+”. I am conducting a study interviewing people who have had parents that came out as LGBTQ+ later in life. The goal of the study is to get a better idea of the experiences of adult children who came from a family in which there were two parental figures of the opposite sex coparenting together then transitioning to living in a blended family with a new parental figure of the same sex as their parent.

    Participation in the study requires one interview conducted over Zoom that will last approximately 30 minutes to one hour. Participants must be 18 years of age or older to participate. In order to schedule an interview, please email me at lgoldsmith@tulane.edu.

Thank you so much for your time. Should you have any questions about the study, please feel free to reach out as well.

Best,

Limor
Appendix B. Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your family
   a. Who is in your family (including siblings, parents, grandparents, stepparents, stepsiblings)?
   b. What is your relationship like with each of these people?

2. How did your parent come out to you?
   a. What was your reaction?
   b. How did you feel? Did you make your emotions known to your parent?

3. Tell me about when you met your parent’s subsequent partner(s).
   a. Has your relationship with this person evolved since you were introduced to them? If so, how is it different now?

4. Tell me about your relationship to your parent’s partner’s children (if applicable).
   a. Do you do things together as a family?
   b. What kinds of things do you do together? What don’t you do together?

5. What was your experience with witnessing your parent come out to extended family members?

6. How do you feel about your relationship with your parent now compared to before they had come out to you?

7. Were there any changes during this transition?
   a. Changes in living location?
   b. Change in school (if applicable)?
   c. Change in relationship to friends or others?
   d. Changes in your family’s financial situation?
8. Is there anything else you would like to share?

9. Do you know anyone else who fits the criteria for this study that might also be interested in participating?
Appendix C. Respondents

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Current Age</th>
<th>Age When Their Parent Came Out to Them</th>
<th>Gender Identity</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation of Respondent</th>
<th>Parent</th>
<th>Siblings</th>
<th>&quot;Stepsiblings&quot;</th>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Mother</td>
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<td>Cindy</td>
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<td>White</td>
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<td>Mother</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Father</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gabrielle</td>
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<tr>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Mother and Father</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Most respondents gave an approximation of the age they were when their parent came out to them
Appendix D. IRB Approval

Tulane Human Research Protection Office
Institutional Review Boards
Biomedical
Social Behavioral
FW0002585

DATE: December 15, 2021
TO: Limor Goldsmith
FROM: Tulane University Social Behavioral IRB
STUDY TITLE: "Transitionary" Families: Looking at Parents "Coming Out" as LGBTQ+
REF #: 2021-1555
SUBMISSION TYPE: Initial Submission
ACTION: APPROVED

On December 16, 2021, the Tulane University Social Behavioral IRB provided an expedited review and approval determination for the initial submission of this minimal risk study. The review was provided in accordance with the appropriate research regulations.

The following items were submitted as part of the submission:

- CIT Training (Other)
- CIT Training (Other)
- Consent Script - Goldsmith.docx (Consent Script)
- IRB Protocol.docx (Study Protocol)
- Questionnaire.docx (Questionnaires/Surveys)
- Recruitment Script.docx (Recruitment Letter)

This study is approved for the local enrollment of 15 subjects.

This study is granted approval on December 16, 2021. The first Annual Progress Report is due on December 15, 2022.

All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Please submit any proposed changes to the research study, including enrollment of additional study participants, to the IRB for review and approval prior to implementation, unless a change is necessary to avoid immediate harm to subjects. If subject safety becomes an issue, please notify Tulane University Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) as soon as possible.

The informed consent process begins with a description of the study and assurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the study

36