A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF NON-LGBT STUDENTS WITH LGBQ PARENTS

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Abstract

There is a lack of qualitative research that has sought to uncover the lived experiences of students who identify as heterosexual/cisgender (i.e., non-LGBT) but have at least one parent who identifies as LGBQ. This phenomenological analysis aimed to uncover common themes for students who have gone through their educational journey with this identity. Social identity theory was used as the theoretical framework for this research. Nine college students from various higher education institutions across the United States were chosen to participate in this study through criterion and snowball sampling. Each participated in two semi-structured interviews and responded to open-ended questions that allowed for them to articulate their experiences from elementary school through college. Study findings include themes of: (1) More Challenging Early Stages, (2) Finding Support, (3) Opening Up, (4) Heightened Consciousness, (5) LGBTQ Affinity, and (6) Decreasing Significance. The themes that were uncovered are relevant for educators and administrators who come into contact with students at all levels of education. Findings also provide insight for LGBQ parents (and future parents) to better understand the potential realities for their children as they progress through school.

*Keywords*: social identity theory, students, LGBQ parents, phenomenology
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enough for helping me see this process through to completion, even with us having two children along the way!

Our two beautiful children, Lukas and Maya, provided me with the inspiration to undertake this study. As a gay father, I am constantly curious about what my children’s future might hold, and I would do anything in my power to help ensure their own positive life experiences. It was after hearing an amazing group of teenagers connected with the organization COLAGE present a workshop about what it was like to have LGBTQ parents that I ultimately decided on this topic. I realized how much there was that I, and others, needed to discover in order to support children such as my own. To all children of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer parents, I offer much love and gratitude.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Problem Statement

It is estimated that there are millions of individuals in the United States who have lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer (LGBTQ) parents (Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, 2002; Johnson & O’Connor, 2002; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Gates, 2013). Heterosexual/cisgender (i.e., non-LGBT) individuals raised with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or queer LGBTQ parents have been referred to by some as *culturally queer/erotically straight* (Garner, 2004) due to their *queer* (non-heteronormative) family structure and upbringing. [See Appendix A for list of terminology and definitions.] The term *bicultural* (Benet-Martinez & Haritatos, 2005; Miramontez, Benet-Martinez, & Nguyen, 2008) has even been applied to individuals who not only have membership in the straight community, but also in the LGBTQ community via their family membership (Goldberg, Kinkler, Richardson, & Downing, 2011). These bicultural individuals often share many similar experiences (Garner, 2004; Lick, Tornello, Riskind, Schmidt, & Patterson, 2012), values (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2012), and hardships (Arm, Horne, & Levitt, 2009; Bos & van Balen, 2008; Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2012; Patterson, 2009) as their parents and others who identify as LGBTQ.

Research has shown that individuals who personally identify as LGBTQ and are connected to an LGBTQ community demonstrate better mental health outcomes compared to those who are disconnected (Detrie & Lease, 2007; Garnets & D’Augelli, 1994; McLaren, Jude, & McLachlan, 2008). Individuals with LGBTQ parents who also identify as LGBTQ themselves (‘second generation’) can more easily gain ‘legitimacy’ to membership in the LGBTQ community based on both their own personal (LGBTQ) identity (Kuvalanka &
Goldberg, 2009). However non-LGBT individuals with LGBTQ parents may have a hard time knowing where they fit in, facing barriers to LGBTQ community-connectedness because they do not personally identify as LGBT, as well as barriers to the straight community due to their queer sensibility (Goldberg et al., 2011).

College is a critical transitional stage of life (Meeus, 2003); however, there has been almost no empirical exploration of college students with LGBTQ parents. There has only been one study that included many college-age participants (ages 18-29), which found that individuals with LGBQ parents who felt connected to the LGBTQ community earlier in life often reconnected into an LGBTQ community after leaving home (Goldberg et al., 2011). The purpose of this study is to explore the educational journey of non-LGBT students who have one or more LGBQ parents and are currently enrolled in an institution of higher education within the United States.

Significance Statement

Students who face a hostile climate in school are highly likely to be negatively impacted (Guiffrida, Gouveia, Wall, & Seward, 2008; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Silverschanz, Cortina, Konik, & Magley, 2008), often in academic performance, educational outcomes, social adjustment, and interpersonal skill development (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). Like LGBTQ children, the children of LGBTQ parents have been found more likely to be stigmatized and the targets of bullying and harassment in primary and secondary schools (Cahill & Tobias, 2007; Goldberg, 2007; Patterson, 2009). Because of their non-traditional family structure, these individuals also face hardships due to numerous laws and policies that negatively affect their lives (Hart, 2005; Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2012; Patterson, 2009).
The transition from high school into higher education is a particularly critical period in life regarding social and academic adjustment (Oswald, & Clark, 2003), as well as potential loneliness and anxiety (Cheng & Furnham, 2002; Halamandaris & Power, 1999). When the challenges surrounding the higher education experience are further compounded by the impact of marginalization, social connectedness is extremely important (Chen, 1999) and the lack of feeling connected to others may lead to voluntary withdrawal (Tinto, 1975). Newcomb and Flacks (1964) “observed that ‘social deviants’ (i.e., persons who are deviant with respect to the prevailing normative and social climate of the college) are less likely to drop out if they are able to establish friendships with students similar to themselves” (p. 107).

Beginning in the late 1960s, formal higher education networks such as clubs and administrative services began emerging for students who identified as LGBTQ to offer support, create a sense of connectedness through community, and positively impact the identity development of these students (Sanlo, 1998; Sanlo, Rankin, & Schoenberg, 2002). It was not until the early 1990s that networks such as Gay-Straight Alliances began appearing at earlier levels of education (Blumenfeld, 1993). Through such structures, LGBTQ individuals may share common experiences (Outcalt, 1998) and benefit from the support and advocacy that derives from such communities (Wall, Washington, Evans, & Papish, 2000). However, no literature has been found that references these LGBTQ-focused networks providing support to students who have ties to this community based on their parents’/family’s non-heteronormative identity. Conversely, individuals with LGBTQ parents sometimes feel neglected or rejected by the LGBTQ community after leaving the confines of their family home if they do not personally identify as LGBT (Hart, 2005; Goldberg et al., 2011). This indicates an even greater challenge
with their ability to receive support from people in terms of “shared [LGBTQ] values, community gatherings, expressions of celebration, and, in some cases, political activism” (Goldberg et al., 2011, p. 2).

Very little is known about this population’s school experiences and how different stages of their educational journey might vary from elementary school through college. Therefore, it is significant to begin to uncover common themes that exist for students as they persist through their academic careers with this social identity.

Research Question

The main research question that guides this phenomenological study is:

“What is the lived educational experience of being a non-LGBT student in the United States who has at least one parent who is LGBQ?”

Positionality Statement

As with all research, it is important for investigators to acknowledge and remain aware of their personal biases and aim to not have any preconceived expectations influence a study (Husserl, 1970; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Based on the research paradigm, design, and tradition, the phenomenological analysis process requires a ‘transcendental’ approach “in which everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994, p.34). In the case of this study, I am a gay father who is also the director of an LGBT Center on a college campus. While the findings from this study are of interest both personally and professionally to me as the researcher, “bracketing” and “epoche” (Drew, 2004; Husserl, 1970; Moustakas, 1994; Tufford & Newman, 2010) required that I set aside personal experiences and preconceived notions in order to directly assist with the
acknowledgement and elimination of “bias interference” (Creswell, 2007). While this is not always possible, I was diligent in my attempts to do so.

It was equally important for me to recognize positionality in the sense that I am a white, middle-class, cisgender (i.e., non-transgender) male, and this combination of privileged identities generally indicates a natural deficit of full understanding about how the world is experienced by those with marginalized identities in terms of race, culture, class, and gender identity (Jupp & Slattery, 2010). There is always the possibility that tensions could arise should a participant assume a researcher does not understand or could not adequately analyze challenging life experiences based on having different in identity markers (Jupp & Slattery, 2010). Therefore it was my role to demonstrate a desire and willingness to understand differences based on issues of power, privilege, and oppression stemming from social identities. I have some knowledge around these issues based on my own sexual-minority identity (gay), my educational pursuits including a master’s degree grounded in counseling, my professional career that has focused on issues of diversity, and the ‘Social Justice Leadership Initiative’ that I co-chair at my institution of employment. Despite all of this, I still could have been viewed by participants simply as a member of the ‘out-group.’ Therefore attempts were made to make it clear that the purpose of the study was not to further marginalize a particular group of people, but rather to potentially help in the process of “end[ing] the oppression and consequent suffering of the other” (Briscoe, 2005, p. 38).

Theoretical Framework

Social Identity Theory (SIT) helped guide this study. SIT examines one’s view of self, and how one interacts with others based on perceived membership in a social group (Tajfel,
SIT is different from Self-Categorization Theory (Hogg & Turner, 1987; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), which focuses on the more general concept of ‘how do I identify’ in relation to social identities (race, religion, sexual orientation, etc.). SIT’s origins were used to determine intergroup behavior based on status, legitimacy and environment (Tajfel, 1984). Interpersonal behavior is considered by those with shared membership (in-group), and intergroup behavior is based on those of different (out-group) memberships (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). SIT considers how one moves through life based on these self/societal categorizations, generally focusing on where one fits in, how one behaves based on status within the group, and relationships in regards to in-group membership and the out-groups of which one is not a member (Turner & Oakes, 1986). Concepts such as stereotyping, feeling threatened by members of the out-group, and having inter-group anxiety have been applied to this theory (Hogg & Turner, 1987; Stephan & Stephan, 1996).

SIT was used in this study to examine how the student participants perceive their sense of self, how their identity impacted their experiences in school, and the effect their identity had on relationships that existed with other individuals.

Note on Terminology

The evolving terminology that captures the diversity in relation to individuals’ sexuality and gender identity can seem both complex and confusing. For instance, what might have once been referred to as the “gay community” might now be referred to as the “LGBT community,” more intentionally recognizing people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender. However, even the term “LGBT” does not capture the interminable identities and labels that are
associated with people who are in the gender and/or sexuality minority. For this reason, umbrella terms such as “queer” are sometimes used (in this case with positive intent) or even added onto the acronym (“LGBTQ”). Yet some might not personally identify as a gender and/or sexuality minority, but still might chose to identify as “queer” for various other reasons.

Attempts were made to use the most accurate terminology and/or acronyms throughout this paper. For instance, participants were described as “non-LGBT” instead of “non-LGBTQ,” because while they were all heterosexual and cisgender (i.e., non-transgender), some did identify as “queer” because of their family structure. Also, participants’ parents were described as “LGBQ” as opposed to “LGBTQ,” because while participants’ parents identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer, none identified as transgender. Different acronyms (e.g., LGB, LGBT, GLBT, LGBQ, LGBTQ) were used depending upon the specific population being referenced or mentioned in a quote. Appendix A (Terminology) also offers a more complete list of terms and definitions.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This study asked college students to reflect on their educational experiences specifically in relation to their identity as heterosexual/cisgender (i.e., non-LGBT) individuals who have at least one parent who identifies as LGBQ. This literature review attempted to examine existing data regarding the experiences and outcomes of individuals with LGBTQ parents, and in some cases compared findings to those of LGBTQ-identified individuals as well as people with heterosexual parents. This review also covered the experience of being ‘bicultural,’ and the significance of transitioning from living at home to living at college. Gaps in existing empirical data were also highlighted.

Individuals with LGBTQ Parents

The earliest research examining the experiences of LGBTQ parents and their children dates back to the late 1970s. Green (1978) researched the sexual identity of 37 children who had homosexual mothers or transsexual mothers or fathers, and Miller (1979) explored family and peer relationships of 40 gay fathers and 14 of their children (Tasker, 2005, pp. 226-228). Multiple reviews have been written that span four decades of existing research and literature regarding members of LGBTQ families (B. Fitzgerald, 1999; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Tasker, 2005; Rosenfeld, 2010). Additional articles have also been published which synthesize findings and provide recommendations, generally for mental health clinicians, about how to work with individuals who have LGBTQ parents (Telingator & Patterson, 2008; T.J. Fitzgerald, 2010). No existing empirical literature gives guidance to educational professionals who work with or support this population.
Only three relatively recent quantitative studies were found in relation to individuals with LGBTQ parents, all which used secondary data. Wainright, Russell, & Patterson (2004) examined the relationships and developmental outcomes for 44 adolescents with LGBTQ parents based on “a national sample of adolescents in the United States collected by Quality Education Data for Add Health” (p. 1888). Data from the same survey was again used when Wainright & Patterson (2006) explored “delinquency, victimization, and substance use among adolescents with female same-sex parents” (p. 526). U.S. Census 2000 data was utilized in Rosenfeld’s (2010) examination of school progress based on grade retention. Being the first national large sample survey for this population (3502 children of same-sex couples), Rosenfeld looked at grade retention, which is generally found “to be a useful measure of difficulties that the students were experiencing at home” (p. 758). Findings indicated “no inherent developmental disadvantage” (p. 770) for these youth. The Rosenfeld study claimed to ultimately validate other similar (smaller/qualitative) findings. Similarly, the quantitative studies based on Add Health (Wainright, Russell & Patterson, 2004; Wainright & Patterson, 2006) also found that a parent’s sexual orientation does not predict the well-being of a child; what actually impacted adolescent outcomes was “the qualities of adolescents’ relationships with parents” (Wainright, Russell, Patterson, 2004, p. 1897). This is similar to Meeus’ (2003) findings that parental support is one of the strongest indicators of adolescents’ psychological well-being, particularly as youth transition into adulthood.

The common thread in empirical research is the sentiment that “children with lesbian and gay parents are developing psychologically, intellectually, behaviorally, and emotionally in positive directions, and that the sexual orientation of parents is not an effective or important
predictor of successful child developments” (B. Fitzgerald, 1999, p. 57). While outcomes have been explored more extensively, the lived experience has been considered to a lesser degree. Stacey & Biblarz (2001) warn that systematic “heterosexism has hampered intellectual progress in the field” (p. 159), indicating that the goal of studies should not always be to continuously compare the outcomes of these individuals/families to a heterosexual ideal or norm. Tasker (2005) points out that there are still foundational differences in the lived experience that “have important implications for managing clinical work with children of lesbian mothers or gay fathers” (p. 224).

Over the past decade, more qualitative studies have been conducted with the intent of gaining a better understanding of what it is like to have the social identity of being the child of LGBTQ parents (Goldberg, 2007; Kuvalanka & Goldberg, 2009; Goldberg et al., 2011; Welsh, 2011). Welsh (2011) stated these individuals have “rarely been given the voice to describe and elaborate upon their lived experiences” (p. 53). A social constructivist and queer theory lens was used by Goldberg (2007) and Kuvalanka & Goldberg (2009) when examining family structure and its impact on external perspectives (such as open-mindedness, sexuality and gender norms). Societal pressures have also been found to push these children towards trying to appear as “normal” or “perfect” as possible to the outside world (Goldberg, 2007; Kuvalanka & Goldberg, 2009; Welsh, 2011).

Welsh’s (2011) study of 13- to 18-year-olds was one of the few to give strength to the adolescent voice, uncovering five pertinent themes for those with this shared identity: unique family concepts; unraveling self-identity opposed to family’s identity; facing tough external challenges; “coming out” about one’s family; and needing to find common community.
Participants indicated the importance of being connected to others with shared experiences. Connectedness provided support, which helped in terms of normalization, learning how to negotiate conflict, finding a safe space to reflect upon life experiences, and diffusing stress and anxiety. Welsh’s study implied these positive results merely came from receiving support from other peers with LGBTQ parents, and did not discuss connectedness or potential support from LGBTQ-identified peers.

One other study was found that explored individuals with LGBQ parents’ ability to connect with LGBTQ communities (Goldberg et al., 2011), examining young adults from ages 18-29. Findings indicated: the strength of the connection was more likely to be stronger for heterosexual children whose parents came out as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer and connected the family into the LGBTQ community earlier in life. For most, their connection to LGBTQ communities was also likely to shift over time. While the sample size was small, boys/men were found less likely to connect to the LGBTQ community than girls/women.

**LGBTQ Students/Individuals**

When empirical examinations have taken place about the sexual identity development process, the focus has been almost exclusively on homosexual/non-heterosexual identity development (Cass, 1979; Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Coleman, 1981; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Minton & McDonald, 1984; Richardson & Hart, 1981; Sophie, 1986; Troiden, 1979, 1989). Developmental theories generally indicate a process of going through stages (Sophie, 1986; Cox & Gallois, 1996), such as Cass’ (1979) popular six-staged homosexual identity formation model, which includes identity confusion, comparison, tolerance, acceptance, pride, and finally synthesis (where one’s sexual identity is integrated into all aspects of self). Sexual minority
development has also been examined in connection with having a racial minority status (Morales, 1990; Collins, 2000; Follins, 2011). Extending beyond one’s sexual identity development, multiple additional factors have been examined in studies, all expressing hardships about identifying as a sexual minority, such as how individuals manage (often by hiding) their sexual identity in relation to others (Griffin, 1992), and the external challenges sexual minority youth experience in the developmental process (Crowley, Harré, & Lunt, 2007; Rotheram-Borus & Fernandez, 1995).

Meyer (1995) stated, “Minority stress is based on the premise that gay people in a heterosexist society are subjected to chronic stress related to their stigmatization” (p. 38). Meyer (1995) further noted that internalized homophobia and actual acts of discrimination and violence can be the cause of such stress. Perceived social support has been found to have a positive impact on the psychological well-being of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth (Detrie & Lease, 2007). Even though more LGBTQ individuals are out than ever, the need for support has continued to increase for those connected to a sexual minority, as there is still a great deal of victimization coming from society at large (Sears, 2005). The American Psychological Association (APA) and the National Association of School Psychologists stressed the need for the support of queer youth in schools, in order to create an educational environment “free from discrimination, harassment, violence, and abuse, and promoting an understanding and acceptance of self” (APA, 1991, para. 13). Goodenow, Szalacha, and Westheimer (2006) found that “the presence of a GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance) or other support group for LGB students was significantly associated with greater safety” (2006, p. 580). When some form of lesbian/gay/bisexual support existed in schools, the level of victimization (stemming from
isolation and homo/biphobia) decreased drastically (Goodenow et al., 2006). Receiving social support from individuals similar to oneself is imperative in order for an individual to feel self-pride (Cass, 1979).

**Bicultural Identity: Culturally Queer/Romantically Straight**

Being bicultural (such as being of two or more races or nationalities) indicates having competency and/or efficacy towards more than one cultural domain (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993), but it also relates to one’s experiences based on having dual social identities (Marks, Patton, & Garcia-Coll, 2011). The bicultural perspective is useful when trying to understand how one ‘fits in’ when identifying with more than one identity and/or community (Goldberg et al., 2011; Samuels, 2010). It is “a dichotomy and a paradox; you are both cultures and at the same time, you are neither” (Benet-Martinez & Haritatos, 2005, p. 1016).

Non-LGBT individuals who have LGBTQ parents (who could be said to have a non-heteronormative or *queer* family identity) could be classified as being bicultural, where they “may identify as members of two dual, sometimes opposing contexts” (Goldberg et al., 2011, p. 4). Goldberg et al.’s (2011) study is the only one of its kind to mention the bicultural perspective when examining these individuals’ experiences navigating LGBTQ community membership. Overall, this qualitative study found that these children felt a strong pull between two communities (LGBTQ vs. the mainstream heterosexual-dominant community), and feeling alienated from the LGBTQ community was a common sentiment: “In the absence of their ‘gay passport’ (i.e., their parents), they are viewed as suspicious interlopers” (Goldberg et al., p. 10). There have been other studies of individuals with LGBTQ parents that mention the different experiences for those who also identify as LGBTQ (also known as “second generation”),
compared to those who do not personally identify as LGBT (e.g., Bozett, 1988; Goldberg, 2007; Kuvulanka & Goldberg, 2009; Saffron, 1998). No studies were found that intentionally examined only individuals who have the bicultural perspective of being a member of a queer family, but personally identifying as non-LGBT.

**Challenges Faced by Children with LGBTQ Parents**

The National Lesbian Family Study (Gartrell, Deck, Rodas, Peyser, & Banks, 2005) found that of the 78 ten-year-old children with LGBTQ parents that were interviewed, 43% were subjected to anti-gay rhetoric from their peers, and 69% of those impacted by homophobic sentiments were angry, upset, or saddened as a result. The conclusion of this study was that the youth’s well-being was negatively impacted based on the direct experience of homophobia (Gartrell et al., 2005). Welsh (2011) found adolescents with same-sex parents react in various ways based on the fear of or direct contact with homophobia, including hiding the truth about their family to “promote a sense of in-group belonging and to protect the self and family from social disapproval that frequently results in feelings of guilt, shame and loss” (p. 59).

Tasker and Golombok (1995) found children raised by lesbian mothers were more likely to be teased about their own (actual or perceived) sexuality, and Welsh (2011) found that children raised by LGB parents are often incorrectly perceived to be LGBTQ themselves. Goodenow et al. (2006) noted that young people who are ‘perceived’ to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) are just as susceptible to victimization as actual LGB youth in schools.

Studies have directly connected the concept of minority stress to the experience of being non-LGBT but having LGB parents (Bos, van Balen, Sanford, & van den Boom, 2004; Bos &
van Balen, 2008; Goldberg, Kinkler, Richardson, & Downing, 2011; Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2012). According to one of the oldest studies of children with gay fathers (Bozett, 1988):

Societal disapproval not only is experienced by gay persons themselves but is also felt by others who are related by blood or other strong bonds. Hence children whose fathers are gay may fear devaluation similar to that experienced by gays in general solely because of their ties to their father. (p.550)

Goldberg et al. (2011) discovered that it is rarely considered that children of LGBQ parents also experience minority stress stemming from homo/bi/transphobia (the fear and/or negative attitudes towards homosexual/bisexuals/ transgender people), stigmatization, and discrimination. Children of LGB parents may also deal with additional “secondary minority stress” that results from observing negative sentiments being subjected onto their parents or LGBTQ people in general (Goldberg, 2007; Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2012), which can also lead to anxiety, stress, depression, and general negative health consequences (Arm, Horne, & Levitt, 2009). Arm, Horne, and Levitt compared this to the concept of secondary ‘traumatic’ stress (Figley, 1998), which can result from empathic sentiments stemming from (perceived or actual) traumatic events experienced by someone else. Factors such as antigay legislation have also been found to impact heterosexual family members similar to their LGBTQ family members in terms of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Russell, 2000).

As the families…bore witness to the struggles of their GLBT family member, they sometimes experienced similar symptoms or developed effective strategies to help cope with the empathy. … Some participants identified so deeply with their family member’s experience that they felt equally attacked by these movements
and policies. They considered themselves members of the GLBT community and experienced rejection by others for being a GLBT family member. Participants were dually impacted by movements and policies when they questioned their own effectiveness. Some participants reported feeling guilty that they were not doing enough to help advance GLBT rights. (Arm, Horne, & Levitt, 2009, p. 93)

For individuals who have a personal connection to a sexual minority identity, direct involvement with the LGBTQ community has been found to decrease alienation/isolation and have a positive impact on one’s well-being (Garnets & D’Augelli, 1994; McLaren, Jude, & McLachlan, 2008). “Gay-supportive resources” have been found to also have value for the heterosexual family members of LGB individuals (Herdt & Koff, 2000; Merighi & Grimes, 2000). However non-LGBT individuals with LGB parents might feel like outsiders to both the LGBTQ and mainstream society (Garner, 2004; Goldberg, 2007). Some have found it to be extremely challenging to be bicultural (the straight member of an LGBTQ-reared family) and access LGBTQ community connectedness and/or support, particularly after leaving their queer-family setting (Hart, 2005; Goldberg et al., 2011). Even if parental support remains in place after an individual leaves home for college, while parental support can have great value for young adults (Meeus, 2003), LGBTQ parents and their non-LGBT children may not be able to fully relate to one another:

Analogous to parents with biracial or multiracial children, family members of GLB individuals typically do not share the same sexual identity as their LGB family member and may not have the experience or resources to manage stressors that occur as a result of being in connection to LGB experience. (Arm et al., 2009, p. 83)
Despite having to potentially face such stressors and hardships, multiple studies have determined that the developmental outcomes, peer relationships, psychological adjustment, and mental health of children with same-sex parents have been comparable to children of heterosexual parents (e.g., Patterson, 2009; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Wainright, Russell, & Patterson, 2004; Tasker, 2005).

From Home Life to Campus Life

The shift from youth to adulthood is now a more extended process than it ever was in the past, resulting in young adults feeling a great burden in the transition from leaving home to completing a degree in higher education (Settersten & Ray, 2010). Once living on their own, “important ‘life experiences’ that prepare (college) students for adulthood in the real world” are often attained through “social learning” and the autonomy of being away from one’s family (Moffatt, 1991, p. 59). The college years are an important transitional life phase, and in the wake of potential loneliness and anxiety (Cheng & Furnham, 2002; Halamandaris & Power, 1999), being socially connected (Chen, 1999) and receiving support from other individuals (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Tinto, 1975) are two extremely important factors for success and persistence.

Within the realm of education, members of all minority groups in need of unique support (Sears, 2005; Tinto, 1975). This need exists all the way through the college level, at which point students who have non-mainstream identities have been found to be at much higher risk of dropping out (Castle, 1993; Tinto, 1975). Various supportive factors, including one’s relationship to family, can have an “overwhelm(ingly)” positive impact on a college student’s experience” (Moffatt, 1991, p. 52). However, while parental support is a better indicator of
psychological well-being during the early/middle stages of adolescence, a “shift” takes place when the child/parent separate and other mechanisms, such as peer support, become much more significant (Meeus, 2003). College attrition rates were found to decrease significantly if individuals with minority status receive support from others who are similar to them (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Newcomb & Flacks, 1964).

Gaps in the Literature

Clear limitations in the literature were found. While the in-school experiences and outcomes for children with LGBQ parents have been examined to a small degree in middle/high school (Wainright, Russell, & Patterson, 2004; Wainright & Patterson, 2006; Telingator & Patterson, 2008; Rosenfeld, 2010; Welsh, 2011), individuals have rarely been asked to tell their own stories about their educational journey. Additionally, there have been no studies that have evaluated the college experience for these individuals. Two studies included individuals who were attending college at the time (Goldberg, 2007; Goldberg et al., 2011); however, these studies did not explicitly explore the experiences and needs of students on college campuses with LGBTQ parents, or ask them to reflect upon earlier educational experiences.

While many studies discussed the hardships faced by individuals with LGBQ parents, none explored in great detail the benefits (or drawbacks) these individuals might experience by attempting to receive social support from LGBTQ communities. In data on LGBTQ-related support, no references were found (empirical or otherwise) with regards to supporting the children of LGBTQ parents. While supportive connections (Goldberg et al., 2011; Welsh, 2011) and LGBTQ community involvement (Bos & van Balen, 2008; Goldberg et al., 2011) for children of LGBQ parents have begun to be examined, Goldberg et al. stated:
[There is still a need] to gain a more in-depth understanding of the valued aspects of community connection...future work should inquire about the impact of LGBTQ community connection on the well-being of young adults with LGBQ parents. (p. 11)

Finally, when reviewing the research related to the children of LGBTQ parents, participants and their families were over-abundantly white, middle/upper class, female, and already connected to some type of queer-family resources (such as Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere, or COLAGE). A majority of participants in the studies were born through alternative fertilization and raised by two mothers, or had been born into a traditional mother/father family and one or both parents came out later in life (leading to a family split). It was rare to find studies where samples included children who had been adopted since birth by same-sex couples, who were of a different race from their parents, who were raised in two-father families, or who had transgender parents. To exemplify just how unrepresentative these samples are, the U.S. Census (2000) found low-income African-American lesbians to be the group within the LGBTQ community most likely to be raising children (Dang & Frazer, 2004). Additionally, Rosenfeld (2010) reviewed and critiqued 45 existing empirical studies (most of which were qualitative) on this population, noting weak subject pools due to factors such as convenience sampling, small sample sizes (mean = 39 participants), narrow queer family representation, and poor overall representation of the U.S. population.

**Conclusion**

Over the decades, the majority of studies about children of LGBQ parents imply that these individuals are for the most part no different from children of heterosexual parents (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). However it has become evident that these individuals face particular
challenges that are unique based on their family identity (Welsh, 2011). Those who fall into this bicultural category in the sense that they are heterosexual but have a queer family structure/upbringing can feel “culturally homeless” by the time they have left the family structure (Goldberg, 2007, p. 560). Departing from home for college is a transitional stage of life, where students have entered an environment where marginalized individuals can feel particularly isolated and in need of support from others who may share a common understanding (Tinto, 1975; Sears, 2005).

There is a gap in literature about the perceptions and experiences of non-LGBT college students with LGBTQ parents and any potential variance that might exist throughout the different stages of their educational journey. This literature review helped provide the context for this research study which aimed to fill that gap, and also informed the design and methodology that was employed.
Chapter 3: Methodology

This research sought to understand the experience of students who have personal ties to LGBTQ issues not because of their own identities, but because they have LGBQ parents. This phenomenological study explores common themes and essential factors that may influence these students’ experiences and perspectives. The following research question guided this study:

“What is the lived educational experience of being a non-LGBT student in the United States who has at least one parent who is LGBQ?”

Research is generally conducted through a particular perspective (or paradigm) that acts as a guide for the epistemological search for truth(s) (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). This study was guided by an “interpretive constructionist” paradigm, exploring how individuals perceive their world, interpret their experiences, and construct their own meaning and reality (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 15). This paradigm assisted in the exploration of meaning based on the participants’ experiences as students and children of LGBQ parents.

Research Approach

Through the tradition of phenomenology, multiple realities were revealed via the emic perspectives expressed by participants of the study (Moustakas, 1994). A phenomenological approach was chosen for this study since its purpose was to explore the educational journey of non-LGBT students who have one or more LGBQ parents. In phenomenological studies, interviews are recommended as a critical way to gain data surrounding the in-depth experiences of those who have lived the phenomenon being explored (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Seidman, 2006). The researcher took quotes and themes directly from the words of participants and used these accounts and perspectives as evidence of a lived reality (Creswell, 2007). The
findings identified “what” had been experienced, and “how” individuals experienced it; they did not aim to explain or analyze experiences, but instead described the essence of participants’ experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Participants
In a phenomenological study, the intention of the participant selection process is to find individuals who have experienced the phenomenon being studied and are able to articulate the experience to the researcher (Polkinghorne, 1989). For this reason, purposeful and criterion sampling along with snowball sampling methods (Creswell, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994) were utilized in order to select participants for this study.

There were a number of criterion used to select participants. These included being an undergraduate between the ages of 18-24, having completed at least one semester at the institution where the individual was currently enrolled, and living away at college (and not with family) during the academic year. Participants could not personally identify as LGBT, but had to have at least one parent who was lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer (LGBTQ). Individuals also had to be proficient in their ability to speak English.

These criterion were decided upon for the following reasons: The participants would fall within the traditional age-range of U.S. college students, and have established an understanding and specific experiences with the educational environment upon which they are reflecting. The participants would also fit into the classification of being ‘culturally queer/erotically straight’ (Garner, 2004), a term that describes "the bicultural identity of heterosexual children who are linked to queerness through their heritage" (p. 198). Finally, English fluency was important as the researcher only speaks English.
Attempts were made to uncover a variety of experiences. Creswell (2007) himself preferred to “employ ‘maximum variation’ as a strategy to represent diverse cases to fully display multiple perspectives” (p. 129). Therefore the researcher attempted to identify a diverse group of participants regarding gender (male/female) and who represented various ethnic/racial backgrounds, socio-economic levels, geographical regions, and LGBTQ family structures. In addition, all of the students chosen to participate in this study attended different schools, which further add to the exploration of the phenomenon.

The researcher would have preferred to narrow the family-structure criteria to include only participants raised since birth in ‘intentionally queer families’ (planned, LGBTQ-reared households) to more fully capture the impact of a ‘culturally queer’ upbringing. However, this would have most likely resulted in the majority (if not all) college-age participants being from female/two-mother households, seeing that it was highly uncommon for same-sex male partners to intentionally form families and raise children together prior to the mid-1990s (Brodzinsky, 2011). Furthermore, there are already numerous studies on intentional lesbian families (e.g., B. Fitzgerald, 1999; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Tasker, 2005). One of the goals of this study was to also include participants who have gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer (GBTQ) fathers, even if these individuals were not raised since birth in queer-father households.

A non-homogeneous group of participants from a variety of colleges across the United States was chosen. Nine participants completed the process, which falls within the adequate sample size for phenomenological research (Dukes, 1984). One additional participant completed the first interview but did not partake in the second interview. Because the tenth individual did not complete the process, his responses were not included in the findings.
Despite extensive outreach efforts to diversify the applicant pool, all individuals who responded to the Call for Participants (Appendix B) identified as white/Caucasian. In addition, while various efforts were made to have parental representation from across the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) spectrum, no individuals came forth as having transgender parents. Due to the void in transgender-parent representation, the main research question explored by this study shifted from “What is the lived educational experience of being a non-LGBT student in the United States who has at least one parent who is LGBTQ?” to “What is the lived educational experience of being a non-LGBT student in the United States who has at least one parent who is LGBQ?”

**Recruitment and Access**

An electronic ‘Call for Participants’ (CfP; Appendix B) was distributed after Northeastern’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study’s ‘Application for IRB Approval’ (Appendix C). The CfP gave a brief explanation of the purpose of the study, participant criteria, compensation (a $25 Amazon.com or iTunes gift card for each participant), and contact information. There was also a statement that read “Selection for the study is not guaranteed, but will be determined during a brief 5-10 minute intake call.”

Targeted recruitment (via the CfP) took place with the assistance of organizations and groups that focus on LGBTQ identities/parents/families and had a policy that allowed them to send out requests for LGBTQ-oriented research (such as COLAGE and Family Equality Council). The CfP was also disseminated through the electronic listserv of the Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals (i.e., Consortium). The Consortium consists of student affairs administrators from over 200 colleges whose role is to address LGBTQ issues
within colleges/universities. College administrators on the Consortium listserv received an email (containing the CfP) from the researcher asking them to forward the CfP to students at their respective institutions (should their school policy allow them to do so).

Individuals interested in participating were asked to call the researcher for more information. During the intake call (Interview Protocol Form, Appendix D), which was not recorded, the researcher briefly explained the scope of the project and asked criteria-based questions, taking hand-written notes of the participants’ answers. After determining if an individual was an adequate candidate, the researcher stated whether or not the individual qualified for the study, explained the potential participant’s role if proceeding, and asked if the student would like to schedule times for the two formal interview calls (which both were to take place within a one-week period). The researcher also attempted snowball sampling (Creswell, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994) by asking if the individual knew of others who met the criteria and might be interested in participating. This was also attempted to assist in attaining students who fit the criteria but were not necessarily connected to LGBTQ-focused organizations such as the ones that sent out the calls for participation. No participants were ultimately obtained via snowball sampling. The intake call was intentionally kept brief, with very few personal details/experiences being asked, as such information was meant to be covered during the recorded interviews.

**Informed Consent**

Individuals who were asked to set up formal interview times at the end of the intake call were also informed that they would be sent a Consent to Participate in Research form (Appendix E) via email. They were asked to read over the form prior to the formal interview call. Per the
approval of the Northeastern University IRB office, there was no need for the participants to sign
the form. However at the beginning of the first interview call, the researcher reviewed the
information on the form with the participant, asked if the participant had any questions, and then
asked the participant to verbally consent (while being recorded). After this was complete, the
researcher continued with the Interview Protocol (Appendix D).

Ethical Considerations

The Consent to Participate Form stated “If you feel uncomfortable replying to any of the
questions that are asked, you are free to decline from answering. You are also free to withdraw
from the study at any time.” During the interview process, no students displayed obvious
discomfort or declined to answer any questions. Every effort possible was made to ensure
confidentiality. No actual names were associated with any interview information; any
information that could be used to identify participants has been altered to protect their
confidentiality; the recording of the interview were not be labeled with actual names, but rather a
pseudonym; all of the researcher’s study-related data files were encrypted and password
protected. Only the researcher and Principal Investigator on this project had access to
identifying information. No other known risks (financial, social, physical, etc.) were associated
with his study.

Data Collection

Qualitative data were collected from nine individuals through in-depth, semi-structured,
phenomenologically based interviews (Appendix D) containing open-ended questions (Creswell,
2007; Seidman, 2006). This form of qualitative responsive interviewing almost mirrors a
conversation, structured through predetermined main questions, which are each followed by
information-seeking probes and follow-up questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Seidman (2006) suggested a series of three interviews, each preferably spaced three to seven days apart: the first focusing on the participant’s life history in regards to the topic, the second focusing on “the present lived experience in the topic area of the study,” and the third allowing for the “participants to reflect on the meaning of their experiences” (p. 18). However, Seidman acknowledged that alterations to the structure are acceptable, “as long as a structure is maintained that allows participants to reconstruct and reflect upon their experiences within the context of their lives” (p. 21). For this study, an alternative two-interview structure was utilized. The first interview focused on the participant’s life history and present day experiences in relation to the topic. This interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes for each participant. The second interview allowed the participant to reflect upon the meaning of the experiences and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes for each participant.

Interviews were conducted in secure settings by the researcher, either in person (for two participants), over the phone (for three participants), or via Skype (for four participants). Skype is an online program that allows people to converse remotely, similar to a telephone conversation, but also offering the ability for individuals to simultaneously see one another. In-person interviews took place at the participants’ requests and in the private location of the researcher’s work office. The researcher conducted all remaining phone and Skype interviews in the secure settings of his work and home offices. During the remote interviews, participants were asked to also be in locations where they could maintain privacy and the ability to concentrate without distractions.
At the end of the second interview, participants were asked for permission to be contacted for any final follow-up questions, if necessary. Individuals were told that if they declined subsequent follow-up, they would still be included in the study. All participants approved future contact, and a total of six clarification questions were emailed to three participants (two each), all of whom replied with brief clarification responses. All interviews were audio-recorded by an electronic application called AudioMemos on two separate devices (the researcher’s iPad and iPhone) to ensure the audio was captured. The electronic recordings were then transferred to a computer as mp4 or .wav files and were password protected.

**Data Storage**

Electronic recordings of all interviews were downloaded and saved to the researcher’s personal USB flash drive, personal external hard drive, and personal (online) iCloud storage account. To ensure security and confidentiality, all files were encrypted and password-protected, making them inaccessible to others. In order for participants to remain anonymous, pseudonyms were used instead of identifying information (name/school) so that their identities could not be recognized by others.

To further ensure confidentiality, all interviews were transcribed directly by the researcher, with the assistance of the computer software program Dragon Naturally Speaking. Transcripts (typed as Microsoft Word documents) were saved in the same secure manner as the electronic recordings. The only other person who had potential access the original files and actual names was the Principal Investigator, should there have been a need.

The collected data was intended to be used for the researcher’s doctoral dissertation and potentially for future journal articles, books, presentations, or research. Even in potential future
instances, confidentiality will continue to be maintained for all participants. Once the dissertation submittal process is fully complete, any hard-copy materials containing interviewee information will be destroyed, and all electronic data will be permanently deleted from the iCloud storage account. All remaining electronic data stored on the researcher’s USB flash drive and personal external hard drive will remain untouched and kept in a locked safe in the researcher’s home. These remaining data and documents will be destroyed five years following the completion of the study.

**Data Analysis**

After interviews were transcribed, they were coded and analyzed through the qualitative data analysis software program MaxQDA. A thematic analysis (Moustakas, 1994) was incorporated, identifying recurrent themes and patterns, while staying grounded in social-constructionist philosophy and highlighting one’s meaning-making processes.

In a phenomenological study, the goal is to highlight “descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience” (Patton, 1990, p.71). Moustakas’ (1994) modification of the Van Kaam method of analysis of phenomenological data was employed when analyzing the data in this study. The steps involved in this process are listed below followed by a detailed description if each:

1. **Listing and Preliminary Grouping (Horizontalization)**
2. **Reduction and Elimination**
3. **Clustering and Thematizing** the Invariant Constituents
4. **Final Identification** of the Invariant Constituents and Themes (Validation)
5. Constructing an **Individual Textural Description** of experience
6. Constructing an **Individual Structural Description** of experience

7. Constructing a **Textural-Structural Description** of experience for each research participant

8. Constructing **Composite Descriptions**, taking all participants’ experiences into account

During horizontalization, every expression that appeared to be relevant to the phenomenon (i.e., significant statement) was listed. When going through the reduction and elimination process, each expression was considered in terms of whether enough information was gathered to understand the particular experience and each experience was labeled in such a way that it was not too vague to be understood. Expressions that did not fit this criterion were eliminated, and those that remained were considered what Moustakas calls **invariant constituents**. These clustered thematic labels helped begin to uncover the main themes of the experiences tied to the phenomenon in the study.

During the validation process, it was necessary to make sure that all invariant constituents for a research participant were in fact **explicit** or **compatible** enough to also make them comprehensible. When they did not fit this criterion, they were not used. As individual textural descriptions were then constructed (**what** happened), it was important to include word-for-word examples based on the individual’s experiences. This was then followed up with individual structural descriptions (**how** it happened), which offer the “underlying dynamics of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 135) for each participant. At this point, it seemed unnecessarily repetitive to then offer what would have been merged textural-structural descriptions for each individual, as this step would not have revealed any new information that had not already been mentioned in the individual’s textural and structural write-ups. Therefore,
the researcher moved onto the final step of creating a composite description of the overall phenomenon. Themes emerged that highlighted the overarching essence of ‘what’ was experienced within the phenomenon, as well as ‘how’ it was experienced by most or all of the individuals.

**Trustworthiness**

The following measures were taken to ensure the trustworthiness and uphold the integrity of the project and its findings:

**Clarifying researcher bias**: The background of the researcher (gay father, university LGBT Center director) was stated from the onset of the research, interviews, and final product, so that the possibilities of bias and/or assumptions were expressed up front (Merriam, 1988). Additionally, the process of *bracketing* and *epoche*, or the “the task of sorting out the qualities that belong to the researcher’s experience of the phenomenon” (Drew, 2004, p. 215) took place throughout the study. A researcher must draw “awareness to presuppositions regarding the topic” (Tufford & Newman, 2010), and “set aside our prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). “The challenge of the Epoche is to be transparent to ourselves, to allow whatever is before us in consciousness to disclose itself so that we may see with new eyes in a naive and completely open manner” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 86). In the case of this study, this meant the researcher acknowledged and then attempted to set aside personal feelings or assumptions that stem from: having done LGBTQ-related work with college students for many years; being a gay father with paternalistic instincts, and whose children might eventually have similar experiences as those of the participants; awareness of findings from other
studies on this population, which had the potential to contradict information being uncovered in this particular study.

**Member checks**: Member checking is another way to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of a study (Creswell, 2007). Member checking involves taking the data back to the participants for review and internal verification (Merriam, 1988). In this study, participants were given the opportunity to review the transcripts from both their first and second interviews. Individualized information was emailed directly to each participant, and they were allowed to provide any feedback in regards to the validity, or make requests to the researcher for alterations, thus enhancing the trustworthiness of the study.

**Rich, thick description**: In this study, the researcher aimed to offer a rich, thick description of the various aspects of the process, data, and findings (Creswell, 2007). This included providing a detailed and explanatory account of the research methodology, strategies used to find participants, data collection and analysis, interpretations of the findings, and validation.

**Additional Considerations to Ensure the Protection of Human Subjects**

Before collecting data, a detailed “Doctoral Thesis Proposal” and “Application for Approval for Use of Human Participation in Research” (Appendix C) were submitted to Northeastern’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) for review. IRB approval indicated adherence to research ethics and the protection of all human subjects. The research process utilizing human subjects (as interviewees) did not begin until after this approval procedure had been completed.

At the beginning of each interview, an introduction statement was shared with participants, restating the purpose of the research, explaining measures that would be taken to
ensure confidentiality, and expressing that participation was voluntary. Individuals were told that they could withdraw from the interview process at any time. Also, as previously stated, individuals were asked to read and agree to a ‘Consent to Participate in Research’ form (Appendix E) that restated much of the same information and allowed for the participant to indicate his/her agreement to participate in the study.

**Modifications to Study**

While conducting the study, two adjustments were made to the original research proposal. Since no participants had transgender parents, the findings from this study were based upon the educational experiences of “students with LGBQ parents” as opposed to the originally proposed “students with LGBTQ parents.” Also, the original intention was to explore only the college experience for these individuals. The interviews were conducted using the Seidman approach (2006), which recommends exploring participants’ life history in connection to the topic (in this case, the educational experiences prior to college). During the interviews and data analysis process, it became clear that the pre-college stages were more integral to the participants in relation to having LGBQ parents, in addition to being quite different from their college experiences. For this reason, the themes and findings that emerged were based upon the participants’ entire educational journey, opposed to just their college experience. Northeastern’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) was made aware of this adjustment and indicated this was acceptable, as neither the interview protocol nor interview questions had strayed from what was originally proposed to IRB (see Application for IRB Approval, Appendix C).
Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter reports the findings that emerged from interviews conducted with nine college students. The students were enrolled at four year institutions in the United States where they had completed at least one semester of college. All participants were between the ages of 18 and 21, identified as heterosexual and cisgender (i.e., non-LGBT), and have at least one parent who identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer (LGBQ). Table 4.1 provides a breakdown of the participants' biographical and educational backgrounds as reported by participants.

The first part of this chapter offers a detailed examination of each participant’s story. This includes a biographical overview as well as a textural and structural analysis of their experiences as students with LGBQ parents. The second part of the chapter presents a description of the major themes and sub-themes that emerged, offering insight into the phenomenon of going through school as a non-LGBT student who has one or more LGBQ parents.

The Experiences

Participant: Amy. Amy is 21-years-old and was born to a lesbian mother and gay father who met each other in college. Amy stated that her parents “fell in love with each other and wanted to create a family,” which also includes Amy’s two sisters (now ages 18 and 24). Both parents eventually settled down with different same-sex partners and moved into nearby homes. Amy and her sisters would go back and forth between them each week. Her mom and her female partner are no longer together; however, they also had twin boys together who are now
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name, Age, Gender, Race</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Pre-College (hometown, schools)</th>
<th>College (year, type/location)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Amy, 21 Female Caucasian| Biological (lesbian) mom and biological (gay) dad. Mom had female partner (11 years, recently split). Dad has husband (together seven years). | **Hometown:** Major city in the Southwest  
**Schools:** Public | **Year:** Senior  
**School:** Small, private Christian (non-denominational) college on the West Coast |
| Emily, 21 Female Caucasian| Biological mom and dad got divorced when Emily was three (mom came out as lesbian). Mom currently single; dad married another woman. | **Hometown:** Major city in Midwest  
**Schools:** Public | **Year:** Senior  
**School:** Large private urban Catholic university in the Midwest |
| Michelle, 19 Female Caucasian| Biological mom and dad got divorced when Michelle was four (dad came out as gay). Mom has new husband; dad currently single. | **Hometown:** Major city in the South  
**Schools:** Public | **Year:** Sophomore  
**School:** Huge public university in the South |
| Chris, 20 Male Caucasian| Biological mom and dad divorced around time Chris was born (dad came out as gay). | **Hometown:** Suburbs of major city in the Northeast  
**Schools:** Private | **Year:** Junior  
**School:** Large private Ivy in the Northeast |
| Nick, 19 Male Caucasian| Raised by two moms (bisexual/lesbian), one who conceived through use of a sperm donor. | **Hometown:** Rural town in the Northeast  
**Schools:** Public | **Year:** Freshman  
**School:** Medium private university in the Northeast |
| Leah, 20 Female Caucasian| Raised by two lesbian moms, one who conceived through use of a sperm donor. | **Hometown:** Small town in Northeast  
**Schools:** Public | **Year:** Junior  
**School:** Small private women's college in New England |
| Maria, 18 Female Caucasian| Lesbian mom & stepmom married for 10 years, biological dad not in picture (he and biological mom were together for only a few months). | **Hometown:** New England town  
**Schools:** Public | **Year:** Freshman  
**School:** Small private women's college in New England (different school than other participant) |
| Owen, 19 Male Caucasian| Born to/raised by two lesbian moms via artificial insemination using known gay male donor who is considered an ‘uncle.’ | **Hometown:** Wealthy white suburb in New England  
**Schools:** Public | **Year:** Freshman  
**School:** Small private non-sectarian Jewish-sponsored university in the Northeast |
| Eva, 18 Female Caucasian| Biological (gay) dad and (lesbian) mom conceived via artificial insemination. Dad has male partner of 17 years, mom has female partner of 10 years. | **Hometown:** Major city in South/ Midwest State  
**Schools:** Private Montessori(grades two-eight), public magnet high school | **Year:** Freshman  
**School:** Large public university in the South |
nine-years-old. Amy grew up attending public schools in what she described as a predominantly conservative, middle/upper-class city in the Southwest. After high school, she moved to the West Coast for college. Currently a junior, she attended two junior/community colleges, and then transferred to a small, private Christian college where she had completed one semester.

**Textural description.** In middle school, kids who were assumed to be gay were constantly teased, and Amy was also bullied by both boys and girls because of her family structure. Many local people knew about Amy’s family after the media had profiled her mom marrying her female partner in San Francisco. Middle school was extremely rough for her, as she was treated like an outcast by her peers. The guys were especially mean, shouting things at her in the hallways such as, “Your mom’s a lesbian; that means you’re lesbian!” Amy decided to transfer and spent her final year of middle school at a different school in the same town. A year later, she merged into the town high school with the old classmates who had previously teased her. However, the bullying did not pick back up again. Amy reported that in her high school, while gay students were not accepted by others, they were tolerated and left alone.

Amy assumed people were still talking about her parents behind her back in high school. While this was initially concerning to her, she did her best to appear confident and not let it bother her. Her good friends in high school all knew her family and really liked her parents. This helped her feel that she had a strong network of support. If her feelings ever did get hurt, she always had people she could talk to who would comfort her. As the number of additional people who knew about her family increased each year of high school, this helped her become more confident.
Amy never had a problem fitting in during high school, having described herself as being a very friendly, social, and involved student. Amy’s high school had a Gay-Straight Alliance, but because she was active in so many other groups, she did not get very involved with it. She was not aware of or involved with any organization for individuals with LGBTQ parents, and she did not know anyone else who had LGBTQ parents other than her siblings.

College has been a very different experience in regards to LGBTQ acceptance. Amy feels that everyone at her school is very open-minded, and she finds herself rarely thinking about her family structure. While the memories of the challenges she faced prior to college remain strong, having a lesbian mother and gay father “doesn’t even faze [her]” in college. She has had only positive experiences with people accepting her family in college. Amy stated, “[That] makes me only embrace my happy, powerful feelings about wanting to share it if people ever ask.” She is becoming active in a sorority, and described herself as “confident” and no longer having insecurities. At this point, she has a great sense of family pride and fully embraces her unique family structure.

**Structural description.** In her earlier years of school, the torment that Amy experienced because of her family structure was so severe that she switched schools at the beginning of eighth grade just to distance herself from certain bullies. Having survived such struggles and being relieved from the teasing allowed Amy to build her confidence in a new environment. Amy believed the many of her peers “[grew] up a little bit” during this time. In ninth grade, she merged into a high school with the students who had previously bullied her. While they most likely had not learned to embrace homosexuality, they left her and her LGBTQ peers alone, which allowed for her to have a much more pleasant school experience.
Amy believed keeping busy and having a positive attitude took her a long way in high school. She felt this approach led to happiness, success, and her never having a problem fitting in socially. She stated, “I just think that it boosted my confidence to make me feel more relaxed in the school social setting.” She realized she could not let people “get to her,” including the people who had previously been cruel to her. She discussed her approach:

In high school, like I was always so friendly, even if you hate someone, be nice to them. Because at the end of the day, what are they going to say bad about you, like ‘oh she was nice to me today?’ So that was my mentality, I would always say ‘hi’ to them even though I knew they made fun of me a couple of years ago, like I don’t hold a grudge on it. I didn’t make friends with people that made fun of me, but I definitely kept my enemies closer. Kill them with kindness!

Amy’s family has had very little impact on her college experiences, and she feels this has led to a greater sense of balance in her life. This not only goes for how others react to her family, but even with her own family relations. She realizes how much she is able to fall back on her parents for advice, and stated “I just see them as my parents—they’re not like ‘the lesbian [or gay] parents’ anymore.” The shift has been an internal and organic evolution. She does not feel like she has necessarily changed, but she has clearly “gotten over” her family being treated as though it is different from any other family. She had a difficult time putting the development into words, stating “It’s hard to explain how it shifted in me, because I don’t feel like it has, although clearly it has.”

The progression that Amy had experienced was in many ways the result of her own personal acceptance of the situation. She stated, “I just feel like it’s so important to know who
you are, love yourself, and then going from that, nothing else really matters.” She is currently not very involved in LGBTQ-related issues or causes, but indicated that she should do more based on the fact that she has a good story to share. She specifically showed interest in helping people who are experiencing struggles similar to those she had gone through. She said, “I just feel for those kinds of people, and I feel like I should be more out to reach others.”

**Participant: Emily.** Emily is a 21-year-old college senior. Her biological mom and dad divorced when she was three, after her mom came out as a lesbian. Her dad eventually married another woman, and her mom had a female partner for a period of time but is currently single. Emily has no siblings. She was raised in a large urban city in the Midwest, which she described as “very conservative” but diverse regarding race and class. She attended small public schools and described her high school as racially diverse and predominantly low income (“working class”). She currently attends a large, private, urban/Midwestern Catholic university. Emily said the school has “social justice” as part of its central mission. She described the student body as predominantly white, upper-class, and religiously diverse.

**Textural description.** Since elementary school, Emily has been open about her mom being a lesbian. “I would share with anyone who wanted to know, [and] never shied away from talking about it.” In elementary school, when she would talk about LGBTQ issues, she could tell the teachers were uncomfortable with it, which Emily attributed in part to the fact that “it was the early 90s ... [and] a lot of them didn’t have kids of LGBT parents in the classroom” prior to her.

Her primary schools were small so everyone always knew about her family. In middle school, she would often have to defend her mom when friends’ parents would ask questions such as “Has [your mom] touched you inappropriately?” or when her father and stepmother’s friends
would express how they were “overly adamant against it.” Emily reported that she got used to dealing with such attitudes. She recalled how earlier in school the people around her had no knowledge about LGBTQ families, so she constantly had to “explain things.” There were only a few “minor and small” instances in school where she felt directly targeted. She mentioned one time in middle school where a student came into her class, dropped a Bible on her desk, and began pointing out passages he believed indicated that homosexuality was a sin. Already aware of the religious opposition towards homosexuality, she told him she did not believe that homosexuality was a sin, and the issue was not pressed any further.

Very few people openly identified as LGBTQ while Emily was in high school. During her sophomore year she met one other student who had two moms (whom her mother had befriended). She mentioned how he was not open to talking about his family, so they had no connection on that level nor did they ever became close. When other classmates struggled with their own identity-related issues, they would often turn to her. It was also during her sophomore year that a boy one grade above her was being harassed for being gay, and he asked her for help. She recounted the situation:

He was scared, he just wanted someone to be there with him as he walked to class. And kind of thinking about that being his reality, … I thought that needed to be addressed and education needed to be out there, to start identifying others in the school that could be allies. So that was kind of what led me to talk to a counselor in our school about starting [a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA)].

After starting the GSA, she felt like she became somewhat known as the ‘face of the cause.’ Not only was she getting people to talk more about issues that were very important to
her, but she also found herself suddenly surrounded by “like-minded people.” Based on the
group and people’s willingness to engage, she stated, “The climate shifted drastically after that
point.”

In college, Emily has remained very open to talking about her family. She stated, “At this
point I would say I’m more of an activist, and even more outspoken if that’s possible.” She has
only met one other student in college who has non-heterosexual parents—another female who
has two moms. She reflected upon their interactions:

It was a fun experience; I mean we would have a lot of similarities and discuss some. …

The inappropriate question asked of me by my friends’ parents, she also had experiences
of that. So I think it was nice to hear that those things were not unique to my experience.

Since this other student identifies as a lesbian, it has been harder for them to relate in
certain other areas. For instance, if Emily is interested in dating a guy, she has to take into
consideration how he and his parents would feel about the fact that she has a lesbian mother.
She discussed how the other college student who has two moms does not necessarily have to
worry about that issue since she herself is a lesbian.

In college, she has made various attempts to connect into the LGBTQ community. However, she has faced rejection, which has made her feel less confident in regards to her
identity. She stated, “Most people in the [college] LGBT community first see me as a
heterosexual, so they make assumptions about me and me being in that space based on that
identity before looking at my family identity.”

In the past year, Emily has been reading up on a term with which she now closely
identifies: “queerspawn.” She stated that individuals who identify with this label often
experience “this rejection in LGBT spaces, yet often feel most comfortable in queer spaces.” She said, “I’m not fully accepted in LGBT spaces [in college],” and she feels “stuck in the middle ... [trying] to find outlets in college that were closer to [her].” In college, she associates less with LGBTQ student groups. She wished that she would have had more chances in college and throughout her life to meet other individuals with LGBTQ parents. She discussed how she felt like there was a queerspawn culture made up of individuals who were connected to each other, but in which she never had the opportunity to participate. The one avenue she found to regain her confidence and ability to share her “knowledge [and] passion about LGBT issues” has been working in her college’s Office of LGBTQ Services.

Structural description. Being open felt essential to Emily as she went through school, seeing she was both directly and indirectly dealing with quite a bit of homophobia, heterosexism, and misunderstanding. She stated, “Generally the more open I was about it, and acting like myself because there is nothing to be ashamed of, [it] was much better received.” She did not see any value in concerning herself with what people thought of her in relation to her family structure. Emily said some of her middle school peers “really seemed to care what other people think,” but she was much less concerned about appealing to people outside of her core group of friends. She learned at an early age that not everyone was going to accept her family, and she learned to distance herself from such people. She explained:

Even if you open up, there are going to be certain people [who] you push away. ... For me I would want to push those people away now. But like for others who are less comfortable with people not liking them, or having differing opinions, and there are
definitely people with personalities that are that way, then it’s not one the most
comfortable thing to do, perhaps.

Emily experienced a shift in school, where the negative experiences stemming from
having a lesbian mother began to decrease over time. Her emotional strength and internal
confidence were what ultimately helped improve the situation. Other marginalized peers noticed
that Emily exuded confidence and pride in regards to being different, and they considered her a
confidant. She reflected upon how peers would always feel comfortable speaking to her about
personal issues, which she believed was the result of her comfort speaking about her family.
When asked what she would say to children with LGBTQ parents who were struggling, she
stated:

It definitely gets better. Kids can be cruel, we know. With bullying and different things,
it’s a much larger problem at a younger age. So if I had advice for them, I’d probably tell
them not to hide their family. I’ve found that generally the more open I was about it, and
acting like myself because there is nothing to be ashamed of, that was much better
received. I didn’t have as many instances of bullying because everyone knew that was
not going to bother me, or something that I felt like I should feel bad about. … [It’s]
harder to bully someone if they have that mentality.

While calling herself an “ally” to the LGBTQ community used to feel appropriate, it
began to feel less so once she arrived at college. She entered into a new environment where
there were many out and proud LGBTQ individuals who were doing the LGBTQ-related work
she had been spearheading in high school. In addition, one’s family structure is much less
visible and relevant in college; this made her feel a sense of loss with regards to a part of her
identity that had previously made her feel “very special.” Being seen as simply an ‘ally’ by her college peers began to make her feel she was being treated as someone less legitimately invested, and as someone who was “outside of the community.” Emily said:

I sometimes walk a weird line of finding … where I fit. … Some friends at school didn’t even think about LGBT issues before as important, or would throw around inappropriate terminology. That made me feel uncomfortable, but then I would be in LGBT spaces in which I felt the most comfortable in, but they were not comfortable with me.

The LGBTQ Office not only became the only space that made her feel both valued and supported based on her identity, but at the same time validated her education-based endeavors and advocacy work. She still does not see herself involved in what she considered to be her college’s LGBTQ community, but her involvement in the work of the office has greatly improved her overall college experience.

**Participant: Michelle.** Michelle is a 19-year-old Caucasian sophomore in college. She was born in South Africa, where her biological parents started a non-denominational Christian church and her dad was the preacher. They divorced when she was four and her brother was nine. When she was six, they all relocated to the United States. Michelle, her mother, and brother moved to a racially and religiously diverse city in the South where she was raised. The siblings would spend part or all of their summers with their dad who lived in another state. Michelle attended two elementary schools: the first was ethnically diverse and lower/middle-class; the second was predominantly white and upper middle-class. Her middle school was a diverse yet conservative public International Baccalaureate (IB) school, and her high school was
a diverse and “open” performing arts magnet school. She currently attends a large public state university that she described as racially mixed and predominantly middle/upper-middle-class.

*Textural description.* Michelle was eight when she saw her dad kiss another man and silently thought to herself, “Okay, so that’s how it is.” During her time in elementary and middle school, Michelle did not think LGBTQ issues were even on anybody else’s radar. She was in seventh grade and enrolled in a “really conservative” middle school when her mother officially told her that her father was gay. Michelle did not know anyone else with LGBTQ parents, and her older brother did not want to talk about it. She stated:

> Having grown up in such a strong religious family, although I had already like known or suspected it, I hadn’t fully accepted it. And so for I would say most of seventh and eighth grade, I just didn’t have any kind of relationship with my dad. … I didn’t know what to say to him.

Around the time she entered high school, she took a trip with her father. After spending that time together, she began “loving [her] dad for who he was, and not for who [she] thought he was.” She described her new high school as an environment where people were more open about sexuality, and where students “weren’t stereotyped for being ‘that gay kid.’” In ninth grade she began feeling more comfortable telling close friends. She stated that by the time she reached 11th grade, “if you were my friend and didn’t know that my dad was gay, you weren’t really my friend.” She said she was friends with everyone she knew, and had no problems fitting in socially. An “organizational leader” known as the *Queen Bee*, she was “open to everybody” and president of her class all four years.
It bothered Michelle that people from her religious community avoided asking anything about her father. Part of the reason she felt her father’s sexuality was essentially a “non-issue” in school was because people generally avoided voicing strong opinions in regards to anything LGBTQ-related. If something of the sort was mentioned in classes, teachers would tell students to discuss it at a different time, outside of the classroom. Many of Michelle’s female friends did not understand the father/daughter dynamic in relation to her having a gay father, and would ask things such as, “Do all you and your dad do is go shopping?” A small percentage of people in her school were very uncomfortable with LGBTQ individuals, and for this reason a Gay-Straight Alliance was created and became the largest club in school while she was there. Michelle was friends with a good number of gay students through her involvement in the musical theatre department. She also ended up becoming friends with a male classmate who has two moms. They had a nice connection that has continued since they now go to the same college. However, she indicated that their connection is more grounded in them being part of the same circle of friends, not the fact that they both have queer family structures.

In college, Michelle has found that many of her peers are “having the opportunity to open their minds” for the first time. While she came in with a greater sense of awareness to diversity, her classmates feel freer to “become either more liberal or conservative.” In regards to LGBTQ issues, “largely there is acceptance,” however she has faced a lot more opposition coming from people who have “huge problems with homosexuality [or any] aspect of sexuality that is not their own.” She has taken classes to expand her own knowledge about sexuality and also spoken with more people on the topic. Now when she is directly confronted with hostility, she feels better prepared to respond. She does not feel that confrontational interactions have
negatively impacted her college education or experience, but finds it bothersome that there are certain people she cannot and will not have relationships with, “because they are so unaccepting.”

Michelle decided she “just needed a break” in college, and is not very active in any organizations. She has a job in customer service through which she has made a large number of LGBTQ friends with whom she socializes. She is the only straight person these friends include when they going out to gay bars, “because they know it’s not going to freak [her] out.” She believes they most likely see her “not so much as one of them, but as less of an outsider, because it’s a total non-issue for [her].” She looks for “values in people, not their sexuality.”

**Structural description.** Michelle did not know what to think or how to react when she was told in seventh grade that her father was gay. Her strong religious upbringing and the fact that her mother had been the one to disclose this information made it difficult for her to process the information. She wished she had someone in a similar situation and close to her own age to speak with or ask questions. She indicated that it would have helped if she knew others who either had LGBTQ parents or were LGBTQ themselves. She felt that having such a support system would have helped her understand what it meant to have a gay father. She needed to have someone else with whom to relate, and not having anyone slowed down her acceptance of her family situation. She stated, “I was so confused.”

Michelle’s perspectives have shifted since entering college. She no longer felt the need to connect with people based on LGBTQ-identity. She does not think that the sexuality of individuals or their parents should play a factor in how people see each other. The way she saw people, “You are not your sexuality, you are you.” Michelle has had a special connection with
people in the LGBTQ community, having a good number of friends who are openly gay. While she does not see herself as a spokesperson for the queer community, she is “intolerant of intolerance.” Being much more aware of the discrimination gay people face, she described taking on a “mothering” role in the community, as she is typically more “nurturing” towards these friends.

As a student with a gay father, Michelle has learned over time to embrace and appreciate her unique identity. She stated, “It makes me feel like not just another person on this huge campus.” She realized that she has unique perspectives that she is eager to share with others. While previously more likely to walk away from people who expressed their opposition to homosexuality, she is now willing to engage in a contentious conversation in order to educate others. She said, “I guess [I found] my voice as I have grown up. … People know I’m not just some person with ears and a mouth who can listen and talk, but somebody who … is informed and wants to talk.” She no longer worries about others rejecting her because of her views or family identity; conversely, she is more likely to reject the possibility of being friends with “very, very conservative” students who express negative views towards LGBTQ people.

Michelle believes that overall, her experiences have taught her to be “more open and accepting of people,” which has in turn helped her also get to know herself better. Experiences such as going to HIV shelters with her dad and witnessing him be “nurturing and wanting to help in his own community” has led her to want to learn more about sociology and human relations. Such experiences have also led her to realize that in the future, she hopes to continue down the path of being an activist for equality. Her diverse life experiences have been a great sense of
motivation. She stated, “[I did] the best I could no matter how people saw me, because I had seen both of my parents honestly overcome so much because of my dad coming out.”

**Participant: Chris.** Chris is a 20-year-old junior who attends what he described as "a large, diverse and progressive” private Ivy League university in the Northeast. His biological mother and father divorced around the time he was born due to his father coming out as gay. He and his (now 24-year-old) sister would typically spend weekdays with their mother in the middle/upper-class suburbs of a major Northeast city, and weekends at their father’s home in the city itself. Chris went to a small private high school that he described as liberal and experimental, with a middle- to (predominantly) upper-class student population that was racially and religiously diverse.

**Textural description.** Around age five, Chris’ dad told him that he was gay. Living in a small town, it was “apparently a big drama” and a lot of people knew about it when he was in elementary school. However, it was “never a big deal” to him. Looking back, he does not remember noticing it having an impact on his life at that stage. He stated:

> The kids couldn’t give a shit. They didn’t really know, they didn’t care, and it never, never affected me. I don’t even remember anyone saying any kind of negative gay derogatory things. … I was probably too young to see the nuances of what was going on.

In middle school, Chris started hearing his classmates saying “that’s gay” and he began to realize that “gay” was taking on a very negative connotation. Though Chris was “always completely okay with it,” he believed that most everyone else felt otherwise, thus he did not discuss his father being gay outside of his close friend-circle. Around age 11, he moved to a
nearby suburb and changed schools; again, he was wary to let people know. However, when he did begin to tell new friends, none of them seemed to think it was a big deal.

Chris eventually entered a high school that he felt was extremely progressive, and “increasingly so” during his time there. He began to have a more nuanced understanding of how “gay” was still being used by his peers. At the same time, he realized he had a unique voice that could be used to address the subject. He stated, “I wanted to embrace it more and make it more of my identity, and talk about it more.” He joined the GSA and eventually became the president. This led him to be more comfortable talking about having a gay father. Chris said:

It wasn’t really something that you just bring up; it rarely comes up in the conversation. But towards high school, you know if people said ‘did your dad get remarried?’ or whatever, then I would more willingly offer the information that he was gay or tell people about it, and people knew because I was the president of the Gay-Straight Alliance.

People were much more aware of Chris’ family structure in high school. He believed this had increasingly positive effects on him, with no negative experiences that he could recall. Known for being a student athlete, involved in student government, and the “most stereotypical straight American high school boy you can imagine,” his openness and affiliation with the GSA had an unexpected impact on how he was perceived. He stated, “[People] looked at me in a more positive light, that not only was my dad gay, but that I was so open about it, willing to talk about it, and proud of it.”

In regards to successfully improving his high school’s LGBTQ-climate, Chris felt he was somewhat an “army of one.” Chris could not remember there being any out LGBTQ students in his school. One of his male friends had two moms, but since their family structures were quite
different, it was a subject matter that they typically never discussed. There were two male adults who were out (the school dean and a teacher) and with whom Chris had a close connection. Having out LGBTQ adults in school meant more to him than out LGBTQ peers. These adults’ self-assurance helped Chris with his own comfort-level. Both adults helped him find resources, including COLAGE, when he completed his senior project focused on how heteronormativity impacted the classroom at his school. He also appreciated them being able to give him their own perspectives on the topic, in addition to those of his dad.

Before Chris arrived at his college, he checked out the LGBT Center and was planning on being involved. However his plans changed shortly after he matriculated. He reflected upon this choice:

I went to the first couple of meetings and I was just sort of like, [laughs] ‘you know, you guys got this!’ There was [sic] a bunch of people that were like really into it and willing to dedicate a lot of more time to this and sort of [say the] same things that I could be saying. … I wanted to focus my energies elsewhere.

Chris became involved in a fraternity that he felt was progressive and accepting in relation to LGBTQ issues; however, similar to his high school experience, he recognized there was still plenty of work to be done. He stated:

I’ve kind of made it my goal that my fraternity is better than most fraternities, but there is still definitely more use of ‘faggot,’ more use of ‘gay,’ more use of that kind of stuff, than there was in high school. … It’s a little bit annoying for me to constantly say, ‘stop saying that, that’s not cool’ all the time. … [But] it’s definitely decreased a lot.
He now knows more gay peers than he did in high school, but he would not consider himself involved in the LGBTQ community or his school’s LGBT Center. He feels they are “very inclusive,” having felt a great deal of camaraderie based on his limited interactions, but this study was the first time he ever saw anything offered related to having LGBTQ parents. Regardless, he believed the LGBT Center should keep their focus on individuals who identify as LGBTQ.

Chris remains very passionate about LGBTQ issues, and puts his focus on having a positive impact in his fraternity as well as in other areas that he felt he had “a responsibility to.” He feels it is unlikely for students to know each other’s’ families in college, stating, “If your parents are sort of removed in high school, your parents out of the freaking picture in college.” However, he appreciated it when he got to have conversations about his family as he felt it helps other people understand him better.

**Structural description.** As a student with an LGBTQ parent, most of Chris’ journey and struggle took place internally. The homophobic language he heard his peers use in middle school was having a strong impact on him. He felt “completely okay” with his dad being gay, but was concerned how people would react if they found out, and unhappy with himself for keeping his dad’s identity a secret. He stated, “Being a straight kid with a gay parent, you do have a closet of your own that you’re going to have to deal with.” He further explained:

> When I would have events or do shows or I had concerts, my dad would come with his partner, and so that sometimes kind of got to me. And I would talk to my dad and be like, ‘It’s not really how I feel, but [I’m] worried about how other people might think of me …
like are they going to think I’m gay or are they going to think that’s bad?’ I was really worried about how other people would perceive it.

When Chris entered into what he considered a “progressive” high school, he recognized that gay slurs were still common, the GSA was waning, and there were no out LGBTQ students. He believed that most of his peers did not understand how some of their words and actions were creating an environment that did not promote LGBTQ acceptance, and this bothered him. Chris realized that no one was challenging the status quo, and that he had the ability to create a movement for positive change. He seized the opportunity and capitalized on his “unique position” of being a popular straight student with a gay dad in order to help improve the LGBTQ-climate. He found a similar opportunity in college, where there was a need for improvement in his fraternity. He stated:

I feel like I have a responsibility or unique place to do something. … I’ve kind of made it a project of mine to really make sure that we stop saying this kind of shit in Chapter and around each other, and make sure the people know I’m in our fraternity now, and I want people to know that my dad is gay.

Chris discussed how when he first opens up about his dad, both high school and college friends have initially been “hesitant” and concerned they might say the wrong thing. However, people generally realize that he is just a “typical normal straight guy” who is simply trying to create more LGBTQ understanding and acceptance, and his casual approach seems to help put others at ease. He once excitedly told two guys who were publicly kissing at a party in his fraternity house “you guys are awesome!,” but he realizes they were probably questioning whether it was even safe for them to be doing so in the first place. He recognized that
homophobic slurs that he hears would likely bother him even more if he were gay himself. Chris explained:

I think my high school was a pretty open and accepting place, but having said that, ... in high school, [you] kind of don’t really want to stand out in any way. ... I had a lot of friends, and I was a relatively popular kid in high school. ... So I think I kind of felt more comfortable in that school environment than other people did. In fact I’m sure that was the case.

Chris’ stated that each stage of his educational experience has been “different at different times.” All the way up through his current time in college, he had been surprised as to the different ways his dad being gay has had an effect on him. His educational process has been one that has continuously changed and evolved in relation to his family. In high school, his uniqueness was “more of a novelty and more interesting;” however in college, “having a gay parent is like ‘oh okay, whatever’” compared to all of the various diverse families and backgrounds of his peers. In contrast to high school, he felt less special or different in college. At the same time, being in such a different environment with so much more diversity has had an impact on how he currently sees himself. He stated:

If I feel less unique now, or less different now, in ten years the whole thing is going to be like silly, that like ‘me having a gay parent’ was even a ‘thing.’ But yeah, I try to continue to be outspoken in the places where I feel like I have a unique voice and a unique responsibility to do so.

Participant: Nick. Nick is a 19-year-old Caucasian male who was raised by his two moms. His biological (bisexual) mother used sperm from a sperm bank, and his other (lesbian)
mother did a second-parent adoption after he was born. Nick was raised as an only child in two very rural (neighboring) lower-middle/middle-class towns in the Northeast. He discovered through an online sperm donor registry that he has 17 half-siblings, and has become close to one of his half-sisters with whom he is close to in age. He went to a public elementary school, a public charter middle school, and a high-ranking, upper-middle-class public regional high school. He is currently a freshman at a mid-sized private Northeast university. The student body at all of his schools has been predominantly white.

**Textural description.** Nick grew up only minutes away from an area that is considered to have one of the highest concentrations of same-sex couples in the country. Growing up, he was constantly exposed to LGBTQ culture, which was “just normal” for him. He knew a few other kids with same-sex parents, but did not have strong relationships with any of them. He and his moms were always involved in local politics and LGBTQ advocacy, but they were not affiliated with organizations that specifically focused on children of LGBTQ parents. There were occasional instances where he and his family were around more LGBTQ families, but for the most part he would hang around with his moms and not associate with the other children.

In terms of being a student with lesbian moms, Nick recalled, “It was hardest in elementary school. I felt the most uncomfortable there.” He considered himself very unpopular in elementary school. He remembered kids calling him “weird” because he did not have a dad, such as when they were asked to draw their family trees. They would say things to him such as, “You have gay moms; you must be gay, too!” Nick found that younger children were often more judgmental and hurtful, not having “the self-control” to simply ask about his family situation. He associated some of the teasing to “the vitriolic and poisonous nature of being an eight-year-
old.” Nick felt it was harder being a child with LGBTQ parents, due to it being a very different experience from others.

In Nick’s opinion, the experience got “exponentially better” after elementary school. He transitioned to a charter school, largely due to the quality of the education, though his mothers also mentioned it would be “more open-minded.” He entered into a much more liberal and progressive environment, which he described as “great” because “no one cared” that he had two moms.

He still felt a bit timid in his new school, but he contributed that in part to the normal awkwardness of being a pre-teenager. Towards the end of middle school, he felt that he finally began to find his place in the world. By tapping into the “groundswell of support” that he realized had always been around him, he became more extroverted and made it his mission to “change the narrative” in terms of what it meant to be an LGBTQ family. He felt it was his duty to no longer be complacent about the stigma that existed in the world.

When Nick entered his regional high school, he was back in school with the elementary school bullies. However, he had reached a new level of confidence. He felt no shame in relation to his family, and “just didn’t care” if anyone else had a problem with it. He stated, “If they didn’t like me, they didn’t have to be friends with me.” In addition to his self-assurance, he realized that “people associate you much less with your family” as you progress through school, and the bullies “got bored” with him.

Nick ended up having a wonderful time in high school, being seen as someone who could lead and connect people. He was president of National Honors Society and a class officer all four years. He was very active in politics and volunteered for the Human Rights Campaign, but
did not get involved with the school’s fairly inactive Gay-Straight Alliance. He was not close friends to any students who identified as LGBTQ in high school, as he generally was more likely to connect more with older adults who were LGBTQ. He recalled:

Through my parents ... I was even on a friendly level with the LGBT people. Because I just always have felt like I am a member of the community. I know some of the people in [AREA WITH A HIGH CONCENTRATION OF LGBTQ PEOPLE], and even though they are like 30 or 40 years older than me, I still feel like they are my friends. ... I just always felt comfortable discussing issues and their relationships and their problems.

Nick believes that by the time students with LGBTQ parents enter college, they no longer have to worry about being teased. He has observed that you generally do not even know the names of your friends’ family members in college, let alone interact with them. If his college peers are curious about his family, they are more likely to ask, “So tell me about your family situation?” or “How do you have two moms?” In college, he is happy to discuss his family with inquisitive people. He felt that as one moves up the education chain, the “negative implications … go away.”

Nick has continued to take on active leadership roles in college. While he was not involved with many LGBTQ-related activities his freshman year, he has decided to live in the school’s LGBTQ and Ally “special interest housing” his sophomore year. He also hoped to get more involved with the LGBT Center and Queer-Straight Alliance student group. He was surprised to discover that one of the first friends he made in college (an African American queer male) also had a lesbian mother. This other student is now one of his best friends. He stated:
It felt really cool to actually have a friend that has the same situation as me... Even [though] we lived literally on opposite sides of the country, there are still things that we have in common. The connection formed largely [due to] our experience with the world based on our parents' sexual orientation.

**Structural description.** Based on his upbringing, surroundings, and experiences growing up, Nick generally felt more comfortable with LGBTQ people than straight people. He did not connect as much with his LGBTQ peers in earlier stages of life, but now that his peer group has entered into adulthood, he has a more diverse group of both gay and straight friends. He felt it was very important for him to have relationships with LGBTQ individuals. His own identity ties into this in terms of relatability, as he stated, “I ... would identify as queer even though I’m straight. … I’ve grown up with gay people, and I probably can relate to them better than [to] most straight people.”

Nick was asked during his interview if he had ever heard of the term ‘queerspawn,’ and after responding that he had not, he immediately stated “I am a queerspawn. … I already can kind of assume what it means.” He later said “I just feel more safe with my own identity as an LGBT spawn than being like in a solely straight community.” While having relationships with other queerspawn might have been beneficial when he was younger and feeling “ostracized and isolated,” he seemed to have little interest in intentionally seeking out such individuals as a college student. He believed having such a connection might “endear [him] to them” a bit more, but it would only be one of many factors he would look for in a friend. Ultimately, he would be more likely to seek out LGBTQ individuals—opposed to individuals with LGBTQ parents—because he felt part of the LGBTQ community.
As a student progressing through school, Nick was able to figure out who he was and continuously sought opportunities that increased his sense of pride in himself and his family. Beginning at an early age, he felt it was important to be social and help others realize that he had very similar experiences as someone with straight parents. When he would hear friends say things like, “Your moms are awesome—I wish I had two moms,” this helped him feel that he was creating positive change and eliminate what he called “the ignorance barrier.” His achievements have prompted him to do even more, which explains why he plans to go into politics and be a change agent on a much larger scale. Nick said he wanted to “vindicate [his] parents,” and described his hopes to permanently alter the “stereotypic perceptions” that exist about families like his.

**Participant: Leah.** Leah is a 20-year-old Caucasian college junior who was raised by two lesbian moms. Her moms conceived by using the sperm of a straight male friend, and he ultimately ended up having less of a connection to Leah than they had originally expected. One mom is Jewish, one Episcopalian, and Leah prefers not to identify with any religion. She was raised in what she described as a small, conservative, homogeneous, white, upper-middle-class suburb in New England. Leah grew up going to public schools, and she now attends a small, private, women’s college in New England that she saw as ethnically diverse and with a more socioeconomically privileged student body.

**Textual description.** Starting in first grade, Leah did not hide the fact that she had two moms. She stated, “I announced it from day one. … I was the only one in the entire public school system.” She got teased all the way through her younger years in school. Each time she would progress into a new school, her moms would speak with the new principal and insist that
the school not allow children to push their daughter around because of her family. Even though
the teasing still happened, Leah felt that she had the support of the school system. She indicated
that she did not care enough about the taunting peers to let them bother her.

From an early age, Leah saw herself as having to advocate for her family. She stated, “I
would kind of rather openly declare myself and say ‘bring on the battle’ than be ambushed.” She
would often have teachers pair her up with special needs children to help them, and Leah’s mom
told her they did this because that she could “stand up” for others.

Leah’s parents always taught her to speak up, and in middle school this resulted in her
friends dropping her “cold turkey” when she spoke up about things they were doing that she
“didn’t think were healthy.” She ended up finding new friends who she described as “the most
welcoming, nonjudgmental group of people.” Things also seemed to improve in relation to her
having two moms, as she stated “people really quit teasing me about it and giving me a hard time
about it in middle school.”

In high school, students were separated by academic ability and Leah was in honors
classes where she felt that she was surrounded with more liberal peers. It initially felt to her as
though the teasing no longer existed; however, she had a boyfriend who ended up telling her “his
friends gave him grief about it.” She was shocked, and recalled the experience that took place in
her earlier high school years:

I went and chewed out his friends, much to his displeasure, but I remember thinking ...
‘this is such a stupid thing to give him grief about.’ … Until then I was not aware that
people were still talking behind my back, were still making a big deal out of it. So that
really affected me.
Leah realized LGBTQ issues were still “taboo,” but decided that she had to not allow the negative sentiments bother her. In her mind, this meant toning down her “flamboyancy” when people would say something that upset her. She gave an example: “Instead of pointing out whenever classmates incorrectly used the word ‘gay,’ I just kind of glared at them instead of calling them out about it.” She tended to do her own thing in high school, and did not consider herself popular.

Leah’s high school had a club that put together some LGBTQ awareness campaigns. However, she described the environment as “somewhere between hostile and indifferent” in terms of LGBTQ-friendliness. No one came out personally identifying as LGBTQ until her senior year. By that point of her high school career, the focus had shifted away from her and her non-normative family structure, as she explained, “Having same-sex parents wasn’t nearly as exciting.”

Leah described her college as both open and welcoming in terms of LGBTQ issues, which she indicated was a very different experience for her. Her peers no longer made a big deal out of her family and have shown her a much greater deal of respect. People were much more likely to ask questions out of sheer interest. She said, “It makes me feel like people actually care, and acknowledge that everybody in the situation is a little bit different.” She did realize that college environments can vary, exemplified by the fact that one of her friends at a school close by got “crapped on” by her bible study friends when standing up for Leah’s family structure.

Leah was relieved to be in a place where she said people “take you for what you are, and what you’ve done, and how you work.” In college, her parents are involved to a much lesser
degree, resulting in her family structure being a much less prominent feature of her life. Having two moms is a good conversation starter and often gave her a unique perspective, but she said, “I don’t let that define everything.”

Leah had met two other female college students who have non-heterosexual parents. One of them is also straight and has two moms, but they only met once and did not exchange contact information so Leah had been unsuccessful in finding her again. The other is now a good friend, but she is a lesbian whose mom and dad divorced after the mom came out. Therefore, while they can relate in some ways, Leah recognized they also had very different families and experiences.

While Leah’s college has a very active LGBTQ community, she has had a mixed experience in terms of being able to relate to LGBTQ peers. She stated that as a whole, “The LGBT community is so flamboyant, so in your face, that I find myself more distanced from it than involved.” She does have LGBTQ friends, but she considered them to be much more "toned-down" in relation to their gay pride. She said of them, “You don’t look at them and think ‘you’re gay or your lesbian.’… They’re not out there with bullhorns parading it. … That’s what I don’t like about some people in the LGBTQ community.”

**Structural description.** Leah had gone through life in what she described as “a special place,” feeling she could relate to the LGBTQ community while simultaneously being a member of the non-LGBTQ community. There were various ways in which she was caught between polar opposites, demonstrating both kindred understandings as well as a strong disconnect. She considered herself to be an ally to the few people she knew to be LGBTQ in high school, as she was able to empathize with the adversity that they faced. In college, she felt a connection based on the supportive attitudes that were reciprocated between her and certain LGBTQ individuals.
Her two best friends also happened to be gay: a male from her high school who came out after he graduated, and a female at her college who is lesbian. However she clarified that she felt a connection only to those whom she considered to be “middle ground,” not individuals who she felt were “stereotypical…super flamboyant or super butch.” Leah had a strong negative reaction when discussing LGBTQ people whom she considered to be unlike her parents. She stated that flamboyant LGBTQ people are propagating “the stupid stereotype that everybody expects LGBT people to be … setting [themselves] up for a [Saturday Night Live] skit.” She strongly stressed the importance for people of minority status to appreciate their culture, but at the same time find common ground in order to “build bridges” with others.

Leah’s willingness to speak out shifted over time. She was more vocal during her earlier stages of school, and “toned down” her efforts to combat anti-LGBTQ sentiments in high school. This seemed to happen when negative sentiments stopped being targeted directly at her, and she did not mention speaking up when the teasing shifted to her peers who began coming out as LGBTQ. This shift might be connected to her mindset that in order to “facilitate acceptance … it’s got to not feel threatening.” However Leah did state that in college, she no longer wanted to “field the questions all the time … it gets exhausting.” Even though she realized that people are now more aware of LGBTQ families, she could not help but consider the possibility of her family still giving people a reason to reject her in the future. She now references “her parents” rather than “her moms” when she is outside of the pool of people she knows. She wants people to first consider her as an individual before looking at her as the member of an LGBTQ family.

**Participant: Maria.** Maria is an 18-year-old Caucasian who is a freshman at a small, private, women’s college in New England. She described her college as “multicultural” and
“middle-to-upper-class.” Maria is an only child and was naturally conceived by her biological mother and father whose relationship only lasted a few months. Maria’s father has never been in her life. Her mom and stepmom have been together since Maria was six and married for over ten years; both identify as lesbian. Prior to high school, Maria was raised in a mostly white, Catholic, upper-class community. Her family moved two towns over for high school, to an area she described as very multicultural and open, and she went to a “very, very diverse” high school.

*Textural description.* Maria recalled her earlier years in school being very challenging. She remembered times such as Father’s Day being hard because of the fact that she had nothing with which to connect. Instead of making something for ‘dad,’ her teachers would allow her to make something for her mom and stepmom, yet she still found these occasions difficult based on the fact that she had no contact with her father.

Maria described her hometown as “not very accepting of the LGBT community,” which prompted her to stay very private about her home life. She would not invite friends over to her house in elementary and middle school because she was afraid of their reactions. She felt this resulted in her having a hard time fitting in at school. Her mothers did their best to shelter her from some of the harsh realities that their family faced. She discussed how it was not until later in life that she learned the reason she was not able to join Girl Scouts was because her moms had been pushed away from the organization.

She went through both elementary and middle school seeing very little acceptance for her family. She felt her classmates were wary towards her family because they did not understand what it meant to have two moms or two dads. She even had friends reject her after learning about her family. She recalled one particular time this happened:
In seventh or eighth grade I ended up telling my best friend at the time ... and I ended up losing a friendship because of it. … I don’t regret telling her or anything because she needed to know about my family, but it was just kind of heartbreaking. … She never talked to me after that, but I [eventually] ended up getting in contact with her, and her family didn’t agree with my parents, they didn’t agree with LGBT things, so my friend kind of followed along with her parents and decided that she would no longer be my friend because of it.

Maria never personally struggled with accepting LGBTQ people, but she felt it would have been very helpful to have had someone in her life who could relate to her situation. In sixth grade, she did go to COLAGE’s website and got connected with a pen pal who also had two moms, but they ended up losing touch after conversing remotely for about a year. Otherwise, she only knew adults who were LGBTQ, many from the Unitarian Universalist church her family attended, but none whom had children of their own. These connections did not fulfill her needs of being able to relate to someone around her own age who could understand what she was experiencing. She explained just how hard the situation was for her:

I was being bullied in eighth grade. It was because I was different, and because I didn’t have a mom and a dad people thought it was weird, that was the term they would use, ‘gross and weird’. … Back then I couldn’t really take it, and it was getting to the point where every day I would come home crying from school because of the bullying, because of what I look like or how my family is.

Even though Maria would tell teachers what was happening, they never did anything to help to improve the situation. She stated, “I think that really upset my mom to because she [was]
not at my school, she [couldn’t] help me, and it was the teachers’ and the administrators’ jobs to stop that from happening to me, and they never did.” When Maria was finishing up middle school, she asked her moms if they could move to a different town. After some discussion, her parents agreed to do so.

Maria found the people at her new high school to be nonjudgmental and very open to diversity, be it in regards to ethnicity, sexual orientation, or other aspects of identity and beliefs. The school had a very popular Gay-Straight Alliance, of which she became a member. Sensing support from both students and teachers prompted Maria to be open about her family and express her acceptance of the LGBTQ community. She was extremely relieved to not experience any negative reactions. Maria was surrounded by individuals who better understood her family structure, and were therefore accepting and supportive. She no longer felt very different from anyone else, which she indicated was a completely new experience compared to her earlier stages of school.

Though Maria did not meet anyone else with LGBTQ parents in high school, she did make friends with peers that personally identified as LGBTQ. Her family structure played a significant role in strengthening those friendships as it gave them an even stronger sense of commonality. Her LGBTQ friends always ended up being very excited when they discovered she had lesbian moms. Most of these friends had never met same-sex couples with kids, so they really appreciated getting to experience her family. In addition, her family gave her LGBTQ high school friends hope that they could have their own families one day.

Maria saw college as a “whole different experience.” Her family has had “no effect” in regards to her fitting in socially. Also, people always tended to be very surprised to learn about
her family in high school. In college, people’s response was generally, “oh, that’s cool,” and they then moved on to a different topic. She believed that having been there for only one semester had already made her a “stronger individual” who was “thicker skinned and able to stand up for [her]self when problems arise.”

There is a large and very welcoming LGBTQ community at her college with whom she has a great connection. She felt close ties because of her parents, and sensed that her LGBTQ peers fully accept her as a member of the community, as well. She continued to tell her story, and witness her family give a sense of both happiness and hope to her LGBTQ friends. Maria still found herself searching for others who might have a story similar to hers, as she had still not met anyone else who also has LGBTQ parents.

**Structural description.** Prior to college, Maria always felt very different, primarily because she was treated this way by others. She stated her family situation is “not really any different from someone else’ situation, except for the fact that I don’t have a father.” The only significant challenge she ever had to deal with was when it came to relating to people when they would talk about having a father. She eventually gained the ability to worry less about other people’s judgment in relation to her unique family structure. The way Maria eventually came to see it, “We both have two parents, so in a way we are the same, but in a totally other way we are different.”

Maria has a unique identity and many experiences with which most could not relate. Her identity in school was always “the girl with lesbian parents.” Having others around her with LGBTQ parents would have helped in regards to support, and also would have made her stand out a little less. While her family structure will always remain an important part of who she is,
she believed she is seen differently in college. She stated, “I don’t want that as part of my title anymore; I’m still happy with that and everything, but I am my own person now.”

Even though she is now recognized more for her personal attributes, Maria still continues to be different, considering she claims membership in the LGBTQ community based on her parents, knowledge, and upbringing. She understands the uniqueness of her identity, and the isolation she has experienced going through life. This has left her with the desire to help younger children who might experience hardships similar to those she faced, considering how much that would have meant to her in her earlier years. Maria has advice for youth with LGBTQ parents: “They have to just stick it out and be themselves. … It’s gonna be hard, but it gets better.”

Every stage of school had been “completely different” for Maria. Not only did she learn about herself and how to deal with others through her journey, but she also helped and witnessed others grow in their understanding and acceptance of difference. Many factors have contributed to the positive changes Maria has experienced: people around her maturing; a compilation of her and other’s associations and experiences; and even more wide-scale, systematic changes that have been taking place in the world. She stated, “As we grow older, we know so much more about the LGBT community. … More and more in this world today, LGBT people are coming out and everything, so it’s not as big of a shocker as it was.”

Participant: Owen. Owen is a 19-year-old Caucasian male. He and his 16-year-old sister were raised by their two Jewish lesbian moms, both conceived through artificial insemination with the assistance of a known sperm donor. The donor is a gay male who has a long-term partner. While these two men have no parental obligations, they have a close
relationship with Owen, who considers them close extended relatives. Owen grew up
“comfortably middle class” in a wealthy New England suburb. He attended his town’s high
ranking public schools (that had a predominantly white and Asian student population), and is
now a freshman at a small, private, non-sectarian Jewish-sponsored university in the Northeast.

**Textural description.** Throughout his life, Owen had often considered to what degree
others were aware of his family structure. In elementary school, he was pretty sure that most of
the students in his class knew, and all of his teachers were definitely aware from relatively early
on each academic year. He felt sure that his neighbors all knew and were supportive, as were his
friends, though at the earlier stages of life, he did not think they really thought much about it.

Once Owen got to middle school, most students knew from elementary school, but his
approach was to not hide it, but also not advertise it. He always felt “positively” about his
family, but he knew they were different. This kept him more hesitant to invite other kids over to
his house, “more out of fear than anything else.” These feelings lingered throughout middle
school and early on in high school. He dealt with some broader socialization difficulties, which
he had previously blamed in some ways on having two moms. Owen stated that having
connected those two variables is “not necessarily fair though, in retrospect.”

Owen grew up knowing other youth with lesbian moms and gay dads through COLAGE,
his synagogue, and other connections his parents had made. He felt it was “definitely good to be
able to connect to these people,” particularly through the structure and organized format
provided by COLAGE gatherings. He felt the discussion group structure they offered was of
great value to him, particularly in middle school. It allowed for him to hear stories, share his
own, and ask questions in regards to how others handled certain situations.
In high school, Owen felt that he “fit in to the extent that anyone does in high school.” He was involved in student government, he ran cross-country, and participated in various clubs, although he never very active in his school’s relatively large Gay-Straight Alliance. While his school environment was “very warm” in terms of LGBTQ acceptance, he still struggled with an internal fear that someone would not accept him after finding out about his family. In addition, he had concerns of his own identity being “mistaken” based on the fact that he had parents who were not heterosexual.

While Owen feared that something negative would happen because of his family, this prophecy never came true. He stated, “In reality ... people viewed me as independent from my family, and so they didn’t care.” Having been more silent and distanced from the (LGBTQ) Ally community earlier in school, Owen eventually began experiencing an internal shift through his freshman and sophomore years of high school. He had become what he described as a “vocal supporter” by senior year. He also experienced a shift in regards to his social abilities in high school. Owen stated:

I became more socially active, more socially outgoing, and more socially competent, too. My social skills improved and I started hanging out with other friends. I still never really invited people over, maybe the same way that other people did, but it didn’t really impact me that much.

When Owen was applying to different colleges, he wrote one of his supplemental college essays about having two moms. He used the essay for several schools, but decided not to use it for others. After giving it more thought, he realized he was not interested in attending a school
where he did not immediately feel comfortable about his family. It was important to Owen that he end up at a school that he considered to be accepting of LGBTQ people.

Having chosen a college and now completed one semester, Owen is at a place where he feels “no different than anyone else,” even more so than in high school. He has told a small number of people about his family, two of whom have met his parents. He would still want to make sure someone knew about his family before he would invite them to his home for a visit. However, the number of times he even has to think about something such as this has reduced greatly. Being away from home has meant that his parents have less of a presence in his life, making him feel like more of an independent person.

In college, Owen finds the LGBTQ community and the school as a whole to be “very supportive” of differences. Owen stated that he did not “feel the need to be involved” in his school’s Gay-Straight Alliance and Queer Resource Center, but further clarified: “I am definitely interested in being involved, but it’s not a priority.” The COLAGE chapter Owen was previously involved with has now been inactive for a few years, and he has yet to meet other students with LGBTQ parents in college. He said that having such connections “definitely would still be nice to have,” but the need has decreased as he has continued to grow more independent from his parents. He stated, “It’s different now, because I’m not living it every day, the way I was before.”

**Structural description.** Having lesbian moms seemed to have more of a personal impact on Owen himself than it did on other people around him. He was never one to “advertise” his family structure; however, he did not have any negative reactions to speak of in relation to the times when he would disclose that he has two moms. While his unique family had never had
much of an impact on his ability to relate to or connect with people whose families are completely straight, he has still found that for the majority of his life, “it’s been a pretty important thing” to also have relationships with people who have LGBTQ parents. In college, he still values being able to have conversations with people who have a similar background to his. However those connections seem to be less important for him in college, compared to the earlier stages in school when he was living at home.

While having attended a variety of seemingly LGBTQ-friendly schools, Owen has not been involved with many LGBTQ groups or activities, nor has he had notably close ties with LGBTQ-individuals his age. As the child of non-heterosexual parents, Owen felt he had needs that were “different from, but overlapping with, people who are in the LGBT community.” When he sensed that LGBTQ individuals did not understand how children of LGBTQ parents have a unique set of needs, this made him feel less accepted by the LGBT community. Though he did believe his college’s LGBTQ community is supportive of him, he did not appear likely to get involved unless he felt it might be personally helpful for him. He stated:

For me, the most important thing is to feel safe and happy in my school and community. I want to be viewed as an independent entity. … I don't want to feel judged or be viewed any differently. LGB classmates also don't want to be judged, but they want to be recognized as a different group, a sexual minority.

The biggest shift Owen has had throughout his educational experience is how he saw himself. He realized that he moved through much of his life possibly more guarded than he needed to be. However, the more independent he has become, the more he has been able to socialize, let go of fear, and feel comfortable talking about his moms and calling himself an ally
to the LGBTQ community. Having COLAGE and being able to discuss his experiences with others in a similar situation was instrumental in Owen’s growth. He understood the value of those experiences, and can even imagine taking on a leadership role in the organization one day, to create similar opportunities for others. He was eager to offer advice to children of LGBTQ parents, who may be challenged with their own internal fear, stating:

I would say connect with other people with LGBTQ parents. I would say invite people over and have successes, remember them—give yourself the opportunity to succeed, … learn how to bring it up in conversation, … and learn from [your] mistakes, if there are any.

Participant: Eva. Eva is an 18-year-old Caucasian who is a college freshman. Her biological father is a gay man, and biological mother is a lesbian. Her parents met through mutual friends and decided to co-parent after knowing each other for a year. Eva was conceived via artificial insemination and has no siblings. Her dad has a male partner of 17 years and her mom has a female partner of ten years. Eva considered her parents’ partners to be part of her immediate family (“parental figures”), but would never refer to them as her parents. She grew up in a Southern/Midwestern state, in a predominantly white and Christian-influenced environment. Her family was affiliated with the Unity Church of Christ, though they were never very active in the church. Her parents always lived within close proximity to each other and Eva would split her time evenly between their houses. She went to a small liberal private Montessori school from second through eighth grade, and then a top ranking public magnet high school that she described as very diverse in terms of race, class, etc. Eva now attends a large public
university in her home state in the South, where “most people are white, there’s some diversity, and a lot of very religious people.”

Textural description. Eva went to a very small and extremely liberal private Montessori school from grades two through eight. She described the overall climate as “very, very accepting.” Eva was generally open and talkative. At the younger ages, her peers tended not to ask many questions or judge much, and she therefore tended not to talk very much about her family. She stated, “Everyone kind of knew my family and I never really had to explain my life.” On the occasions when her family did come up, she never received negative reactions. When describing the general response, she said it was more like, “‘Whoa, that’s different’ … a little bit of surprise, but not in a bad way.”

Eva then entered a public magnet high school that was urban, very diverse, nationally ranked, and what she described as “not too cliquey.” Eva sensed that her school was fairly socially liberal (“accepting-to-tolerant”); however, she feared she would become an outcast if she came out about her parents. She expressed that this lead her to be less like herself and more “awkward and closed off” during her freshman and sophomore years. She stated, “It doesn’t affect who I am at all. … It was just scary for me to not have control over it.”

Eva had gone through most of her schooling without knowing anyone else with LGBTQ parents. She and her family then attended an ‘R Family Vacation’ cruise for LGBTQ families during her second year of high school, which ended up being “kind of a turning point” for her. On this cruise, she was surrounded by LGBTQ families and was even asked to be on a panel to share her story about what it was like for her to grow up with gay parents. She had never really
discussed her experiences with others prior to then. At that point, a shift occurred in how she saw herself in terms of being an individual with non-heterosexual parents. She explained:

Meeting kids with LGBT parents helped a lot. … I never met any until I met them, and I heard their stories, and I think that was probably the biggest contributing factor. … It just helped me, I realized that there are other kids out there, and they talked about what they had gone through with having to always tell people about their parents, and so I realized that I was going to be okay, and it wasn’t going to be that hard.

Returning to school her junior year, she still had not really told her peers about her family. She then wrote an essay for English class about having gay parents. Her English teacher asked if she would read it aloud, and though she was extremely scared, she got up the courage to do it. Though her essay prompted some immediate debate amongst her classmates, she witnessed a large number of her peers defending her family. Having people who she felt she barely knew seem to understand and support her gave her the boost that she felt she needed.

At this point, Eva decided to fully open up about both her life and her family. Eventually, everybody at her school knew about her family, and no one ever made an issue out of it. Eva felt much more comfortable, less closed off, and “herself” during her final two years of high school. Wanting to become involved in advocacy work, she became the president of her high school’s Gay-Straight Alliance, allowing her to become very close friends with peers who were LGBTQ. She even discovered that one of her male high school friends had a lesbian mom, although this proved to not be very helpful as he was not very comfortable discussing his family at that point in his life.
Eva now attends a very large public college in her home state, which she chose because of a scholarship and the fact that it is close to home. Most of the students come from the same regional area, and her social circle mainly consists of her friends from high school. She felt the school puts a great deal of emphasis on football and Greek Life, and has a student body that is mixed with regards to LGBTQ acceptance. She described the climate:

I just kind of stick with people I went to high school with, but that’s a good thing, there’s probably like 20 of us. … [In my group], everyone’s very accepting and tolerant and open-minded. But there are a lot of people who have a lot of issues against gay people. Like recently [gay columnist and It Gets Better campaign founder] Dan Savage came to speak at the school, and of course I went and it was fantastic. And I’m surprised at the turnout, it was great, but people [were] freaking out about it on the internet, they tried to get a petition, and somebody compared him to Hitler in our college newspaper. And I was like ‘oh my God, seriously?’

Anyone Eva has a relationship with in college knows about her family, and she has not encountered anyone being directly mean to her. Nothing negative or awkward has ever happened when her parents have come to visit her in school. However, she feels this might be due to living in her “own little bubble,” considering the fact that even her roommate has known her and her family since they were seven-years-old.

Eva started to get involved with gay-rights advocacy on campus, but decided to halt her involvement in the college LGBTQ community because she wants to transfer to a different school. She said, “More and more I am wanting to go somewhere more liberal, … which I think does tie back to having LGBT parents.” She therefore has a strong desire to get involved in gay
rights advocacy upon transferring to a new school. Not only are the issues of extreme importance to her, but she also feels she could add a viewpoint that is different from that of most people. She ultimately hopes to leave her home state and transfer to the Northeast, specifically to the school where her high school friend with a lesbian mom attends. While this friend was previously closed off regarding his own LGBTQ family structure, Eva said, “He’s better about it now, ... and now he’s my best friend.”

**Structural description.** Having been raised around LGBTQ people her whole life, Eva finds it easier to relate to the LGBTQ community than to the straight community. She is more comfortable around LGBTQ people because she feels she can let her guard down and be more herself. Despite not identifying as LGBT, she finds it easier to bond with gay people than straight people, which leaves her essentially straddling both communities. Not having been raised observing strict gender roles from her parents, she mentioned not even fully understanding how to act out the role of being in a straight relationship. Simple things such as allowing for a boyfriend to pay for dinner seem odd to her. She and her friends joke that she is such a “gay” straight person. She humorously inferred that she is “trying to become more straight” so that she might “understand how these straight relationships work.”

Though Eva feels such a close affinity to LGBTQ people and identity, there have been times she has not always felt fully accepted as part of the LGBTQ community. Some people who identify as LGBTQ have inferred that Eva “doesn’t understand” and they have not realized that she has had to deal with many similar (as well as additional) struggles, still having to come out in her own right. While she has occasionally felt that certain LGBTQ individuals have
expected her to take extra steps in order to gain their acceptance, this has not happened frequently, nor with people whom she would actually desire to call her friends.

Eva’s interactions with other youth her age with LGBTQ parents was minimal and sporadic, however she still benefited greatly from these connections. Even though her school setting was liberal, she was navigating through the process on her own. She had witnessed her family facing “so much discrimination,” which she partially attributed to the geographic location where they resided. This left her feeling extremely scared in regards to how she would be treated. It was essential for her to have an experience such as the R Family cruise, where she could meet others like her and feel less alone, in order to understand that she would be okay. The greatest lesson she learned from others with LGBTQ parents was to not be concerned over the fact that not everyone would accept her. While this was initially difficult to hear, she eventually came to accept the critical message she was being given: If someone has a problem with her family, she should not place any value on associating with them.

Once Eva gained confidence and an “I really just [don’t] care” attitude, she was able to go from being quiet and scared to being ready to take on the world. The major shift was not her feeling that everyone needed to know about her family; she stated, “It was more a turning point in how I felt about telling people.” Once she was open and confident, she did not receive negative reactions. Her previous awkward feelings stemmed more from her internal fear than how others saw her. Her newfound confidence helped her fit in much easier in school. The greater the number of her peers who were aware and okay with her family, the more comfortable Eva became with herself and her school environment. Such successes prompted her to continue down this new path, as she said she wanted to “tell the world: ‘Hey look, I turned out fine!’”
Themes

Taking the collective experiences of all participants in this study into account, certain composite themes emerged that were true for most or all nine of these students with LGBQ parents. The underlying essence of their educational experiences can be summarized into six categories: earlier challenges, social support, opening up, heightened consciousness, LGBTQ affinity, and decreasing significance. This chapter offers a composite description of these common themes.

**Theme: The earlier stages were more challenging.** All participants experienced difficult challenges connected to having LGBQ parents when going through school. Oftentimes these students had to contend with peers, teachers, and administrators who did not understand their family structures or who had incorrect perceptions based on stereotypes. Students also experienced direct mistreatment from their peers, and societal homophobia and anti-LGBTQ sentiments that were frequently present in their educational environments. Such adversities generally took place pre-college, with middle school being the phase when severe challenges were most commonly endured. The specific experiences and degree of difficulties varied for participants, as did the level of impact and their individual reactions.

**Lack of awareness.** The participants often felt frustrated in school when confronted with others’ lack of understanding regarding what it meant to have LGBQ parents. This generally had more of a direct impact on the participants’ pre-college lives, and had particular significance for many students in elementary and middle school. Some pointed out how this was a time before same-sex marriage became such a highly politicized issue in the United States, when there was a general lack of awareness that LGBTQ individuals could even have children. Most experienced
situations where people would express confusion or disbelief that they did not have a heterosexual mother and father.

The students of LGBQ parents were often made to feel uncomfortable at school and that they had to teach-the-teacher. Educators would typically not consider anything other than traditional nuclear families. Some teachers would be noticeably confused when same-sex parents would show up to parent-teacher conferences, while others would tell students their family situation did not make sense. One student recalled being made to feel “weird” by his teacher and classmates because his family tree looked so different from everyone else’s in the classroom. Leah stated:

Teachers wouldn’t think. … They’d assign something and it was about family structure and [they didn’t consider] not everyone has a nuclear family. It wasn’t just me, … it was kids of divorced parents, single parents… .

Particularly when participants were younger, it was often difficult for them to clarify what they believed should have been a simple explanation about their family structure. Both students and educators often did not know how to react when they learned a participant did not have a traditional mother/father family structure. People would sometimes have good intentions but be unsure how to ask questions if they were unclear about something. Chris has experienced this throughout his life, stating:

At first they [don’t] know what to make of the whole thing … walking on eggshells around certain issues. … They personally are uncomfortable with it. I think it’s more that they don’t want to say anything that I would consider offensive, or they don’t want to put me in an uncomfortable position. … That’s kind of been the same before and in college.
The children of LGBQ parents also felt challenged by what was often described as “ignorance” that stemmed from stereotypes or prejudices about people who identify as LGBTQ. Such misnomers were hurtful and made some students feel they had to constantly educate people. Many participants referenced how kids of gay parents are often misperceived to be “messed up,” and Amy said that her friend’s parents would be “extra sensitive” towards her and “worried” that her home life must not be normal. Michelle reflected upon how people often thought her gay father was unfit to be a parent, and that he must only be interested in taking her shopping. Emily’s friends’ parents were very skeptical of her mother, and would ask unwarranted questions about her mom’s sex life and if her mom had ever sexually abused her. Nick reflected upon people who had not had “exposure to the LGBT community or people ... who have two LGBT parents,” and concluded “they are just ignorant about the nature of people themselves.”

*Direct mistreatment.* Prior to entering college, more than half of the participants had to endure poor treatment they received from their peers due to having LGBQ parents. In elementary and middle school, these students mentioned being teased, yelled at, rejected from organizations, and even losing friends because of their family. Leah recalled how her high school boyfriend was even teased for dating her because she had two moms. Michelle mentioned how negative interactions often took place with “people who [were] raised with completely straight parents who just think that you are terrible person and your family are [sic] terrible people because you were not raised the same way they were.” Participants believed that it was not uncommon for their peers’ negative attitudes and behaviors to be taught or instigated
by their parents. Being treated poorly was very hard for the students to deal with; some discussed how they would just go home and cry.

None of the students who endured bullying referenced their teachers or administrators trying to do anything to improve the situation. Maria mentioned how she would tell her teachers about the bullying she was enduring in middle school, but “they wouldn’t do anything about it.” Some participants mentioned how they and their parents were often perplexed regarding what could be done to improve the situation. Three participants decided the best option was to change environments and ended up transferring to different schools.

Many participants believed that the harsh treatment they endured could still be expected to take place at the earlier stages of schooling, due to the fact that younger children often pick on anyone who is “different.” It was for this reason that Amy stated “middle school was a nightmare,” with mistreatment causing her to transfer in seventh grade. Emily stated, “Kids can be cruel. … With bullying and different things, it’s a much larger problem at a younger age.”

**Pervasive homophobia.** Negative LGBTQ-sentiments seemed to be present and have a direct impact on the children of LGBQ parents in almost all educational environments, including schools they felt were “liberal,” “open,” and “accepting.” What could also be described as “homophobia” did not have to be directed at the participants or their families in order for it to still hurt them. For instance, participants found it upsetting to commonly hear language such as “that’s gay” and “faggot” used by their peers. Owen mentioned not joining the Boy Scouts with his friends because it “is not a very [LGBTQ] accepting organization nationally.” Emily felt propelled to do something after a boy she “didn’t really know” randomly stopped her in the halls and asked for her help, as he was terrified by the homophobic harassment he was experiencing.
Some had to contend with confusion when they were younger as to why “gay” was being used with such a negative connotation in school. Nick explained that this caused him to “doubt the normalcy” of his family at one stage in elementary school. As Chris stated, “It affects you even though you’re not gay yourself.”

**Theme: Finding support.** It was instrumental for the students of LGBQ parents to feel they had people in their lives who supported their family structure as they progressed through the education system. Support often meant having individuals with whom they could talk to about their families, not feel be judged by, and relate. Support generally ended up coming from either family members, close friends, people who identified as LGBTQ, or people who had LGBTQ parents. It was common for participants to have wished they had more social support during the earlier stages of school.

**The value of support.** When the students were surrounded by people in school who were supportive of their families, they generally faced fewer challenges and had more peaceful experiences. Whether the support came from individuals or the school system as a whole, it always made the students feel that people cared about them. The benefits of support where amplified when the child of LGBQ parents had someone who could empathize and relate to their situation.

Support often took the form of other people’s acceptance and appreciation for the participants’ families. The more this existed in a student’s life, the more confident they felt about their non-traditional family structure. The students did not need to feel the support of everyone around them, so long as they had some connections with people who could help them feel less alienated in their journey. Such acceptance helped “normalize” the non-traditional
family situation for both the participants and the people in their lives, generally allowing for
more cross-cultural relatability. Amy stated, “A lot of my friends that knew, they really liked my
parents and my family, which made my support group that much stronger.” Having such support
even helped some students become more extroverted. Nick mentioned, “Positive reinforcement
… is really good. It reinforces the pride and the comfort that I feel being me.”

Feeling supported with regards to having LGBQ parents was more critical at the earlier
stages of education for these participants. Elementary and middle school were where
participants experienced the most judgment and teasing because of their family structure. These
participants were at the initial stages of learning how to embrace being unique with regards to
their family structure, and were often more emotionally fragile. Having a close connection with
parents and siblings also proved beneficial as these students progressed through school. Amy
felt that the support system she had at home when growing up was “one of the most important
things” for her. She explained:

Me and my sisters are very close and I know I can go to them … if there was something
going on, … something I couldn’t really talk to anyone else about, because they didn’t
know those relationships, let alone the little small details of my family. … They would
kind of just help me, bring me back to balance and everything, and I helped them do the
same. … I also have my parents; I could always call my mom.

Being selective. All of the participants were intentionally selective regarding with whom
they associated. They felt it was important to have friends who were “open minded” and
accepting of their family. As Leah stated, “I wasn’t friends with people who gave me a hard
time about it or made me feel like I was different, who didn’t love my parents.” Some had this
mentality from the moment they entered elementary school, while others eventually gained this level of confidence over time. Nick stated, “If someone is just teasing you, by the time you’re in freshman year of high school, you just don’t associate with them, and you just are like ‘these people are a-holes, I’m not going to go near them.’” Participants discussed how students are generally more concerned over what people will think of them in the earlier stages of school. Participants could not change who they had for parents, so if others chose not to like them because of their family, they eventually accepted that this was out of their control.

Many of the participants solely focused their energy on the immediate group of people they surrounded themselves with in school in order to feel comfort and support. Emily stated her “core friend group” was very accepting, which meant she did not have to concern herself with “appealing to people” beyond them. Eva explained that if people ended up expressing negative sentiments towards her family in any situation, she “[did] not want to be friends with them.” Participants experienced having friends who were supportive of them and their families at all stages, from elementary school through college. Some participants found it beneficial to connect into what Emily called “close niche groups” such as band, the theatre department, and student government.

**LGBTQ-connections.** In addition to having connections with individuals who were LGBTQ-friendly, participants also had connections with individuals other than their parents who either identified as LGBTQ or had LGBTQ parents. Such connections helped the students feel less alienated in terms of their own LGBTQ family identity, and often provided a common understanding with regards to difference, as well.
Prior to high school, most participants only knew older adults who were LGBTQ through their parents, school, or churches. These connections were beneficial to the participants, allowing them to see positive representations of people who openly identified as LGBTQ other than their parents. However, it was generally difficult for participants to feel a personal relationship with these individuals because of the age gap. Maria stated, “It was much harder to talk to adults …because they’re not really at your level.” Not everyone felt this way; since a young age, Nick had LGBTQ friends who were decades older than him and with whom he shared a close level of understanding.

As the participants progressed through their difficult earlier stages of school, there were no out LGBTQ peers with whom they could feel a sense of understanding. It was not until high school or college that participants began having classmates come out as LGBTQ. Some participants formed friendships and even became “best friends” with LGBTQ peers in high school. For others, their relationships with LGBTQ peers were more casual and based on a shared understanding with regards to homophobia, discrimination, and a desire to create more accepting school environments. In many cases, participants saw themselves more likely to support their LGBTQ peers in high school, as many of the struggles these peers were beginning to face were issues that the participants had begun dealing with at much earlier stages of their lives.

Most participants grew up either knowing no one or only a small number of individuals with LGBTQ parents (see Table 4.2). Many wished they had known more people with LGBTQ parents who were their age, as they often felt alienated in relation to their family identity. They felt that such connections would have been especially helpful in middle and high school, when
they were trying to process their unique family identity and cope with negative treatment from others. Maria stated, “I would’ve loved to have that one person or those two people that I could talk to, and maybe they had the same issues that I did with bullying and everything.” Michelle mentioned how she wished she had “older peers” she could have “ask questions” to when she was told her dad was gay in seventh grade.

The participants felt that their need and interest in being supported by others with LGBTQ parents generally decreased by their later high school years. However, even once Amy reached high school and felt more confident about herself and her family, she still thought about how she had never met anyone other than her sisters who also had LGBTQ parents. She stated, “In the back of my head [I still thought] it would always be nice to have extra people.”

As current college students, many felt a decreased need to feel supported by others with LGBTQ parents, but instead felt a desire to support younger individuals with LGBTQ parents who might be struggling. Most indicated that having a personal connection to these students is what interested them the most, but had no connections to organizations that might offer such opportunities. As Amy stated, “I have a good story to share. … There are other people that need support. … I just feel for those kinds of people, and I feel like I should be more out to reach others.”

**Theme: Opening up.** All participants had internalized fear connected to having a “different” family, which they eventually recognized they had to overcome. They understood that keeping a key aspect of their lives hidden was impacting their ability to be themselves and fully connect with others. Despite the positive feelings they had towards their parents or the level of support they had around them, beginning to “come out” was always a scary challenge.
At various stages, participants were able to decrease their concern over what others would think and began to open up about their families. For most, a “positive feedback cycle” began once they were able to tell people about their families, receive affirming reactions, and gain increasing confidence in themselves and their ability to be more open.

Fear = silence. Fear was a very common emotion experienced by participants. This existed for most at some point prior to midway through high school. Participants worried about receiving negative reactions or being rejected by their peers because of their family structure. Some tried to cope with fear by taking on an assertive attitude, even if they were not as confident as they made others believe them to be. Amy stated, “[There] was sort of like a front I put up, you know like ‘I don’t care,’ but then in the back of my mind I really did.”

All participants discussed times in school when they intentionally kept silent about the fact that they had LGBQ parents. Some kept their parents veiled at earlier stages, refusing to invite their peers over to play or for birthday parties. A few intentionally kept certain friends/boyfriends/girlfriends from meeting their parents. More than half had at least one experience where they wanted to avoid being seen with their parents at school functions or college tours because of concern about what people might think.

Some were open about their families during the earlier stages of school, but would then choose to not disclose information about their parents after entering a new school environment. Emily was open about her family through eighth grade, but went “into the closet” for the first time after entering a high school with all new students. Leah had been vocal about having lesbian moms since first grade, but became less likely to disclose this information as she neared college graduation, concerned it might impact her chances to become employed or get accepted
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Connections to Others with LGBTQ Parents</th>
<th>Significance of These Relationships</th>
<th>Connection to Resources for Children of LGBTQ Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>Only knows her two sisters (close in age) and much younger twin brothers. Has never met anyone else.</td>
<td>Does not think about it; no desire because she has her sisters.</td>
<td>Aware of COLAGE and other resources, but has never personally gotten connected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>Has met two: a (straight) male in high school and a (lesbian) female in college; not close with either.</td>
<td>Wished she knew more. Felt such connections are highly significant, and that she missed out on experiencing a cultural group she is part of.</td>
<td>Stumbled upon COLAGE last year, no formal connection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>Has one (straight) male friend with two moms (they went to high school and now college together). Her older brother won't discuss dad being gay with her.</td>
<td>She felt it would have helped when her dad came out in 7th grade, but it later became insignificant to know others.</td>
<td>Is aware of COLAGE but has no connection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>Has met two: a (straight) male friend he grew up with who has two moms and a (straight) female he briefly met whose gay dad abandoned his family after coming out; couldn’t relate to either.</td>
<td>Nice to know his friend was there, but it didn't have much relevance or any impact on him.</td>
<td>Had never heard of COLAGE.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>Has met five. Pre-college: three his age (all with two moms) and one young child (with two dads). &quot;I didn’t have really strong relationships with any of them.&quot; College: one good (gay) male friend (with a queer mom).</td>
<td>More important when younger; today, little-to-no significance. Would be interesting to share stories, but no urge to search for such relationships.</td>
<td>Never heard of COLAGE. Familiar but not involved with Family Equality Council.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leah</td>
<td>Has met two. Pre-college: close (lesbian) friend who has a mom who came out as lesbian. College: briefly spoke with a (straight) female with two moms, now can't find her.</td>
<td>Wanted someone she could relate to as far as being a straight female with two lesbian moms. &quot;I wish they had been more prevalent, both in high school and now.&quot;</td>
<td>None mentioned, but discovered this study on the COLAGE Facebook page.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Has met none, but had a pen pal with two moms in sixth grade (arranged by COLAGE).</td>
<td>&quot;It’s a great significance; I think that would be fantastic for me...to have that connection with someone who has the same kind of family as I do.&quot; Still hopes to meet others.</td>
<td>None mentioned beyond COLAGE connecting her with a pen pal. “I don’t really know resources to look for to meet other people.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owen</td>
<td>Has met many others throughout life, through family friends, synagogue, COLAGE, and mom's job (helping “lesbians … become pregnant”).</td>
<td>&quot;It’s always been significant. I think there was a period in maybe middle school or early high school where it was even more important for me.&quot;</td>
<td>Closely connected to COLAGE prior to college. Might eventually want to reconnect as a leader.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>Has met some others in high school through R Family Vacations. Best friend from high school has lesbian mom. Parent's LGBTQ friends have young kids. Met no one in college.</td>
<td>&quot;I do wish I knew other people with LGBT parents. … It used to bother me kind of, and it is [still] hard sometimes.&quot;</td>
<td>Regrets not being able to have COLAGE connection when younger. Attended R Family Vacations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
into certain graduate schools.

Some students mentioned feeling morally challenged about hiding such an important part of their identity. Almost all participants explained that despite the internal challenges they were facing, they still had a great deal of love and pride for their family. However, beginning at young ages they generally had to learn how to balance this love with tension that stemmed from internal and external sources. Emily explained:

It’s hard, because it depends on how bad you really want to fit in. … You don’t always have to mention that you have an LGBT family. … You could potentially hide it if you wanted to, but then it’s that question of whether you’re being true to yourself, and honest about talking about your life and not feel like you’re hiding it.

More than half of the participants indicated that their earlier choices to hide their family structure from others might not have been necessary. Maria mentioned how in retrospect she wished she had been more open about her family when she was younger, but had been too afraid she could not “get anyone to accept [her].” Nick also mentioned how even in situations where it was probably safe to discuss his family in elementary school, he avoided doing so. Even in “safer” situations, both of these students had reason to fear negative outcomes, considering both experienced bullying and rejection because of their families.

The internal fear of rejection carried over into college for only a small number of participants. One of the younger participants mentioned still grappling with some fear, but having a belief that the fear would continue to decrease through college and be “reduced to zero at some point.”
**Overcoming fear.** Participants felt that the way for them to overcome their fear was to become more confident and try to stop caring about what people thought about their families. This typically meant no longer hiding that they had LGBQ parents. Eva stated, “I know how it is to sort of come out, to an extent,” and this sentiment was shared by most participants. The students reached this point at different stages of their educational journey. Various factors contributed to their ability to do so, including: connecting to others who had similar experiences or views on diversity; escaping a hostile environment; building up a tolerance to adversity; peers maturing and becoming more tolerant; no longer caring what other people thought. Nick was able to reach his “more confident” stage after escaping a harsh environment and transferring to an “accepting” and “progressive” middle school. Amy said, “I had built myself up so much in middle school after being made fun of, that I felt in high school like I just didn’t care anymore. … That’s where I [gained] confidence.” Eva became “more confident and more opened” in high school because she finally connected with others who had LGBTQ parents. Maria acknowledged that it can be hard to overcome fear when going through school, though she had this advice to offer younger students who struggle with having LGBTQ parents:

> You have to accept it, and just embrace it really, and be proud of what you have. … It makes you a little bit different, but you still have your parents, and they’re going to love you no matter what.

**Positive feedback cycle.** High school was the most common time for participants to begin more openly discussing their family as well as their support of LGBTQ issues and individuals. At this stage of their lives, the majority of participants were experiencing an affirmative response from their peers, which in turn helped them build up even more confidence.
Chris said the “positive feedback cycle” allowed him to further embrace his family identity. He stated, “It only had more positive effects on my own self-esteem and my own ability to feel like I connect with people around me.” A positive feedback cycle caused the majority of participants to become increasingly open as they entered adulthood. As Michelle stated, “In ninth grade, I started telling just like a couple of my close friends. … I would say [by] 11th grade, if you were my friend and didn’t know that my dad was gay, you weren’t really my friend.”

Being able to overcome fear and be more open about their families also impacted how the participants were viewed and treated by others. There were some instances when peers became uncomfortable with the participants and distanced themselves. However, many others came to see the participants as brave confidants and would confide in them about personal issues. One of the most beneficial impacts was when peers who used to outwardly express their negative sentiments towards the participants became silenced. Emily stated:

The more open I was about it, acting like myself because there is nothing to be ashamed of, [the] much better received. I didn’t have as many instances of bullying because everyone knew that was not going to bother me, or something that I felt like I should feel bad about.

It is important to note that the positive feedback cycle did not exist in all situations. Nick, Amy, and Maria all endured significant amounts of negative feedback when peers found out about their parents in elementary and middle schools, but this subsided after they left those school environments. Leah had been open and proud about her family since the moment she entered first grade, but she endured a decent amount of negative feedback all the way through high school. This caused a decrease in her willingness to openly discuss her parents and LGBTQ
issues in high school. However, with the acceptance of Leah, very little negative feedback existed for the participants by the time they were telling others about their families in high school.

**Theme: Heightened consciousness.** Most participants felt they had a high level of awareness around issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion because of their family structure and the values they were taught by their LGBQ parents. This resulted in them being more likely to speak up in the face of injustice, take part in advocacy work, support others, and be drawn to people and environments that were more accepting of difference. The children of LGBQ parents felt this way with regards to issues having to do with marginalized people of various social identities. However, this heightened awareness was most frequently discussed in relation to issues connected to LGBTQ identity.

**Educating others.** Participants commonly made efforts to educate others in order to help people better understand what it meant to be a family with LGBQ parents. Participants shared a belief that once people got to know or interact with their families, it would make it easier for others to relate to them. The more participants were able to help their peers understand their LGBQ families, the more they were able to correct misunderstandings. Multiple participants displayed pride in the fact that their friends “loved” their parents once they got to know them.

The typical message participants aimed to get across was that families with LGBQ parents are similar to families with heterosexual parents. As Michelle stated, “I view my family the way they view their family, and I feel like there is no difference.” The fact that Nick has two moms is one of the “first things someone will learn” about him, and that he felt he has had the “exact same life experiences as someone with straight parents.” Similar to others, he was
constantly educating people about LGBQ families as he saw it as his “duty to not just be complacent about the stigma against people.”

* A need to advocate. *Almost all of the participants had been involved in various LGBTQ advocacy efforts. For many, this began alongside their parents at earlier stages of their lives. Most continued to stand as an ally for LGBTQ people and advocate on their own accord at different stages or throughout their lives. Advocacy oftentimes took place within the structure of their schools; some efforts were intentional and ongoing, while others were reactionary and momentary.

Many felt the need to either get involved with or start up a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) in high school in order to promote a more LGBTQ-friendly climate. As president of his high school’s GSA, Chris not only felt he had “a responsibility to speak out” about having a gay dad, but he also hoped this might help combat the homophobic language and anti-gay sentiments he was hearing from his peers. He even focused his high school senior project on helping teachers find ways to combat heteronormativity at the lower stages of his school system. Emily felt propelled to start a GSA in her high school after a boy she “didn’t really know” randomly stopped her in the halls and asked for her help because he was so scared from the homophobic harassment he was experiencing. Many of the students felt a noticeable shift in LGBTQ acceptance during their time working towards such change in high school.

Most participants were at the forefront of the battles against injustice in their schools. Multiple instances were mentioned where participants spoke up immediately when they saw someone being treated poorly and needing an ally. Their unique family structures helped them develop what Nick called a “broad acceptance of diversity.” This resulted in them possessing
what Leah described as “a real awareness of prejudice and standing up against prejudice.”
Michelle stated that because of her upbringing, “I am more proactive in stopping discrimination
against every type of person.”

While most participants were connected into various advocacy efforts in middle or high
school, they generally were less formally involved in college. They typically suggested this was
because they had less time and also decided taking a step back since more people were involved
with advocacy at their institutions. Many indicated that they hoped to eventually start or
continue doing more advocacy work in college. Some even mentioned wanting to put forth more
substantial advocacy efforts after they graduate, as it was an integral part of their identity.

**Theme: LGBTQ affinity.** Though participants identified as heterosexual and cisgender,
they all expressed having a strong affinity with LGBTQ individuals. Having been raised by
LGBQ parents allowed them to gain a sense of comfort around LGBTQ people. Participants
mentioned having a deep understanding of LGBTQ history, the impact of HIV/AIDS, and queer
culture. As Amy stated, “I’m very familiar with the community, and I understand it.”
Participants also felt they could empathize with gay people and their experiences more than the
typical straight person who was raised by straight parents. Most had been exposed to the
negative sentiment and discrimination that exists towards LGBTQ people since a young age.
While they had this sense of kinship, many participants were sure to clarify they would never
fully be able to comprehend what it felt like to personally identify as LGBTQ. Michelle stated,
“Not that I understand what they go through, anywhere close to someone else who was queer
would, but. . . . I’m more aware of it and more sensitive to the issues that they face.”
**Individual relationships.** Most of the participants did not begin to develop friendships with LGBTQ peers until high school. By college, they were more likely to have created close relationships with LGBTQ people, with many having best friends who identified as LGBTQ. Some indicated that having connections with people who are LGBTQ was of great significance to them. Nick stated, “That’s kind of part of my identity, so not having relationships with people who have experienced that sense of community and that culture and that society. … I would feel just more empty” (Nick).

For many, there was a supportive reciprocity that resulted from having relationships with LGBTQ people. Often, the participants were the first person their LGBTQ peers would come out to or lean on when they were struggling. For instance, Michelle discussed how she takes on a “mothering” role to her LGBTQ friends. Some participants also mentioned how their family structure served as a source of excitement and inspiration for their LGBTQ peers. Alternatively, LGBTQ peers often helped the participants feel less alone with regards to being “different.” They were also willing to stand up as allies for LGBTQ families, and served as companions when working towards making school environments more LGBTQ-friendly. Even when strong friendships did not exist, the participants generally still recognized the mutual benefits of having LGBTQ people in their lives.

Not all participants found it critical to have strong ties with LGBTQ individuals. Chris did not have close LGBTQ friends in either high school or college. He said he would not want to “feel severed” from LGBTQ people, but at the same time did not feel it was “essential” to have close connections. Leah has two best friends (male and female) who are gay and lesbian, but she distances herself from LGBTQ people who are “flamboyant” and “out there with bullhorns
parading it.” Owen seemed to be the only actual outlier. While he acknowledged having some shared hopes with LGBTQ people and that it was “useful” to know them, he did not have or concern himself with having connections with LGBTQ peers. He stressed that having relationships with the children of LGBTQ people came much more naturally and was of much more significance to him.

Most of the participants seemed to feel that a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity was no longer a major factor in their ability to connect or relate, compared to the individual’s personality, values, and beliefs. A few mentioned that they tried not to even think of people in terms of their sexuality anymore. As Maria noted, “In college, I don’t think of [LGBTQ people] really any different … it’s a nice connecting point, but I don’t think that it really matters anymore.”

**Community membership.** Multiple participants mentioned feeling more comfortable around LGBTQ people or in LGBTQ-dominated settings. These students felt less judged and more like they could be themselves in these spaces. Eva discussed having “a better starting point with LGBTQ people.” Emily stated, “I kind of always felt at home and comfortable in LGBT spaces [and] in the community in general. … I would go to a gay bar over a straight bar, it is just where I feel more comfortable.” Michelle was the only straight person her LGBTQ friends would invite to gay clubs with them, because they knew such environments would not “freak [her] out.”

The majority of participants had not previously given thought to whether or not they were “members” of the LGBTQ community. However when asked, most concluded that in some way they did have a form of membership. It was often a challenge for the participants to express
exactly where they fit into the LGBTQ community. Some felt they connected in because of their parents’ membership, while others felt that their personal identity and understanding of the community gained them access. A couple have identified as “queerspawn,” a term created by COLAGE that indicates having LGBTQ parents. Owen connected with this identity and described it as “maybe … a subset of” the LGBTQ community. Nick was the only participant who identified himself as “queer” based on factors other than his sexual orientation/gender identity, stating “I would identify as queer even though I’m straight. … I always say I’m an honorary member of the gay community.”

A sense of duel-connection to both ‘gay’ and ‘straight’ communities was common amongst participants. In some instances, being able to “straddle both” was described as “kind of cool,” while others felt it put them “in a weird space.” Owen and Emily were the only participants who mentioned experiencing rejection from the LGBTQ community. Emily was quite upset to experience this in college, considering she had the opposite experience in high school. In college, she continued to desire inclusion in LGBTQ spaces, and she did not feel fully accepted in heterosexual spaces. For Owen, the rejection was more an issue of different needs; he did not want to be viewed as “different,” where he felt his LGB classmates wanted to be “recognized as a different group—a sexual minority.”

**Theme: Decreasing significance.** While family identity was highly prevalent in elementary and middle school, it had less and less of an impact on the participants’ experiences as they progressed into high school and college. Nick explained how negative implications decrease “as you work up the education chain.” A noticeable shift in significance occurred for most by the time they were midway through high school. Similar to other participants, Owen felt
that “even more than in high school,” his college experience was “no different” than it would be for peers who had straight parents. While Leah was the participant for whom hardship carried over into high school the most, she stated that by college, “People quit caring [and] making a big deal” over the fact that she had two moms.

**Awareness, acceptance, affirmation.** Most participants felt that being “different” was much more accepted, expected, and respected in college. Participants felt they had personally learned to appreciate diversity earlier in life. However, many of their peers had only begun to have more exposure and appreciation for differences post-high school.

Participants believed that the diversity of identities and opinions in college meant that more students were willing to contribute to conversations that they had often avoided prior to college. As a result, many experienced their peers becoming more interested in learning about their families. Leah felt a sense of relief that her college peers had a genuine curiosity about her family. She stated, “It makes me feel like people actually care.”

The majority of participants described their colleges as open, accepting, supportive, and progressive in terms of LGBTQ-friendliness. However, many of the students did acknowledge that anti-LGBTQ sentiments and homophobic language still existed to various degrees in their colleges. No student experienced anyone directly giving them a hard time about their family in college. Michelle and Eva saw less overall LGBTQ acceptance at their large public Southern institutions, but they too described a balance of people on both sides of LGBTQ acceptance at their universities. Many felt that being away from home and in an environment where people had so many different opinions helped them grow into what Maria described as a “stronger individual.”
Most participants had not met others with LGBQ parents in college, but many appreciated that this meant they could contribute what Michelle described as a “unique perspective” to conversations. A small number of students mentioned feeling “less special” in college as a result of being surrounded by a more diverse student population that included many more out LGBTQ students. Emily mentioned this being an adjustment; her unique identity had previously helped her lead the way in advocating for change in high school, but offered her less clout in college. Nick stated, “[In] college, you meet so many different kinds of people ... with so many different kinds of backgrounds, and [it’s] so much more diverse. … Having a gay parent is like, ‘Oh, okay, whatever.’”

**Gaining distance.** College took the participants away from their hometown “bubble” and placed them in an environment where their peers no longer knew or were concerned about each other’s families. Their institutions gathered large numbers of people from all over the world, and students’ home lives were no longer an important factor in their day-to-day interactions. Chris stated, families were “out of the equation” in college.

College was quite different from what the participants experienced had in their earlier school years, when their parents had more of a presence in their lives. In college, friends were much less likely to visit each other’s houses, and parents were not picking their kids up after practice or showing up to school plays. Owen stated, “I’m not living it every day, the way I was before… It’s not the same, my everyday experience.”

While all participants were still close with their parents after leaving home, college had given them more control over who knew that they had an LGBQ family structure. Some would more freely share this information than others, but they all indicated that most of their close
college friends knew about their parents. No instances were mentioned where participants intentionally hid this information, nor did any of the students seem fearful of their peers knowing. Amy stated, “It’s not like you go around and say to people ‘Oh, my parents are gay.’ I mean if you ask, I’ll tell you.”

Since families had become less prominent as the students entered adulthood, this allowed these students to be perceived more for their own identity as opposed to that of their parents. Participants generally felt that distance began to grow between them and their families mid-high school and became more prevalent in college. Some predicted they would gain even more independence from their parents’ identities as they began their careers and potentially started building their own families. This was seen by the students as a natural progression, and not an attempt to intentionally separate themselves from their families. With regards to continuing to gain independence, Owen stated, “[I’m] looking forward to it just as much as anyone looks forward to growing up.”

**Summary of Findings**

Though the participants in this study had a variety of different experiences as they went through school, common themes still emerged. Due to their LGBQ-family structures, the participants were all impacted by both internal and external factors that had significant influence on their sense of self, relationship with others, and school experiences. Being surrounded by others who accepted their family structure was very beneficial, particularly during the more challenging elementary and middle school years. Many had times when they hid their family structure from others due to fear of negative reactions. Most eventually experienced what one student referred to as a "positive feedback cycle": the safer and more supported they felt, the
more they were able to overcome fear and open up about their family. By the later stages of high school and into college, the strength they had gained from their past experiences as well as the physical distance from their family and home-life resulted in their LGBQ-parents having significantly less impact on their educational experiences. However, these students maintained a strong affinity towards LGBTQ people and issues in college, as well as a great sense of pride in their family structure.
Chapter 5: Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

This doctoral study aimed to answer the question, “What is the lived educational experience of being a non-LGBT student in the United States who has at least one parent who is LGBQ?” This research endeavor differs from most previous studies on this population that have generally aimed to explore specific outcomes related to having non-heterosexual parents, often comparing the results to those of children with heterosexual parents (i.e., Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). This study neither aimed to compare participants to others with different family structures nor weigh outcomes. Its goal was to allow the participants’ reflective words and stories to paint a picture of what it is like to go through school having LGBQ parents.

The initial intention of this study was to focus specifically on the students’ experiences in college. College was originally chosen due to a void in empirical literature focusing on this period of life/education. With this in mind, the Seidman (2006) interview approach to phenomenology was utilized, which asks participants to discuss their experiences leading up to the topic being explored [see Interview Protocol Form, Appendix D]. In the process, a vast amount of rich information was shared by the students that covered their entire academic experience, filling an even greater void in previous literature. As Chris stated, “It’s a journey. … Every step along the way, I mean literally up until college, I didn’t kind of know where it was going to take me or how it was going to affect me.” All participants experienced a continuous evolution of experiences, and for this reason the findings shared in this study span their entire educational journey (elementary school through college). The themes that were uncovered are not only relevant for those who work in higher education, but also to individuals who come into contact with students at all levels of schooling. The findings also aim to provide insight to
LGBTQ parents (and future parents), so that they may better understand the potential realities for their children as they progress through their educational journey.

Welsh (2011) explained how there have been very few instances where individuals with LGBTQ parents have been able to use their own words to describe their experiences. That was the intention of this study, specifically focusing on educational experiences. By asking questions through the lens of social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner & Oakes, 1986), this study sheds light upon how these students see themselves, relate to others, and ‘fit in’ at school. The remainder of this chapter covers: the contributions this study has made in relation to previous research, theory, and practical implications; the limitations of this study; suggestions for future research; and a conclusive summary.

**Contributions to Research**

This study asked current college students to reflect upon their entire educational journey, from elementary school up to their present-day college experience. The results from this study can be compared to research findings from previous studies, such as the ones referenced in the Chapter Two Literature Review, which have investigated the experiences of children with LGBTQ parents, bicultural identity, the value of supportive relationships, and college transition. When comparing, some findings have held true, while others have proven to be different.

**Divergent findings.** Previous studies have found that after individuals with LGBQ parents move away from their family home, this has resulted in some subsequently feeling forgotten or rejected by the LGBTQ community (Hart, 2005; Goldberg, Kinkler, Richardson, & Downing, 2011). In contrast, only one participant in this study (Emily) felt that the legitimacy of her LGBTQ community membership was challenged by her LGBTQ peers in college. Owen did
mention feeling “a lack of acceptance in the LGBT community” but he explained this was more a “lack of understanding about how my needs are different from, but overlapping with, people who are in the LGBT community.” None of the remaining participants mentioned experiencing rejection or feeling forgotten by LGBTQ communities after leaving home for college. One difference between this and previous studies could be that some participants of this study had minimal connections to LGBTQ peers throughout their lives; therefore, they may have never had a need to feel accepted into LGBTQ communities in the first place.

Goldberg, Kinkler, Richardson, and Downing’s previous study (2011) found that having a bicultural identity (in this case, being straight with LGBTQ parents) created a strong pull between the straight and LGBTQ communities. This was not found to be true for eight of the nine participants in this study. Almost all current participants mentioned having an understanding and affinity towards LGBTQ people. Only one seemed to be caught in the middle, as Goldberg (2007) described as “culturally homeless” (p. 560) due to her unique identity. This participant expressed specific challenges related to feeling accepted by LGBTQ people. Two others mentioned feeling uncomfortable in certain LGBTQ environments in college, but did not allude to feeling a pull towards such environments. About half of the participants mentioned that their LGBTQ affinity was so strong that they often felt more comfortable and at ease around LGBTQ people. Two participants (a male and female) discussed how they could fit into both communities without facing barriers, but often felt more comfortable around LGBTQ people than around straight people.

Previous studies also found that individuals with LGB parents often felt a pressure as children to be “normal” or “perfect” (Goldberg, 2007; Kuvalanka & Goldberg, 2009; Welsh,
In this study none of the participants referenced feeling this pressure when they were younger. Most participants in this study did express a desire to demonstrate to others that their families were not different from other families, and that LGBTQ parents raise normal, well-adjusted children. In high school Leah wanted to invite a conservative political candidate to her house for dinner because she “wanted him to see that we’re not that different.” However, participants’ desires to change people’s negative perceptions were based on creating a societal shift in terms of increasing acceptance and understanding and did not stem from them feeling a “pressure” to be seen as “normal.” When Eva said, “I kind of just want to tell the world, ‘Hey look, I turned out fine,’” this was in reference to educating others, as she wanted younger children with LGBTQ parents to face less negativity towards their families and have an easier experience growing up than she did.

Goldberg, Kinkler, Richardson, and Downing (2011) also found that the heterosexual children whose parents came out as LGBTQ earlier in life and connected the family into the LGBTQ community were more likely to have a strong connection with the LGBTQ community after leaving home. This study was partially inconsistent in regards to such correlation. The earlier findings held true for five participants whose parents were “out” their entire lives, with the children’s later desire to be connected to the LGBTQ community on par with the connection they had to the community earlier in life. However, for the other four these factors did not seem to be related. Owen, Amy, and Chris all grew up with “out” parents who were connected into the LGBTQ community, but after leaving home for college they did not need to have a strong LGBTQ community connection despite their affinity for LGBTQ people. Michelle was informed that her father was gay in seventh grade and it took her the rest of junior high to
become comfortable; however, she ended up having close connections to the LGBTQ community in high school and college. Goldberg et al.’s (2011) study also found that the desire for a connection was weaker for men than women, and in this study one of the three males (Nick) and four of the six females (Maria, Eva, Emily, and Michelle) displayed interest in having a strong connection to the LGBTQ community. It is important to note that Goldberg et al. highlighted that the desire for these connections can and will shift over time.

Finally, Tinto (1975) found that marginalized college students were at greater risk of dropping out, and Newcomb and Flacks (1964) discovered that support from others with similar minority status helped increase attrition rates. It is unclear whether this study backs up these findings at the college level. In primary school, Maria, Amy, and Nick were bullied and did end up transferring to different schools. However, none of the nine participants seemed to face substantial oppression in college or be at risk of dropping out. Eva is the one possible outlier. She experienced low levels of intolerance in relation to her family pre-college, but had witnessed higher levels of LGBTQ intolerance in college. She expressed wanting to transfer somewhere “more liberal,” and said “I think it does tie back to having LGBT parents.” Eva hoped to end up at the same university her best friend who has a queer mom was attending; however, she did not indicate that being with someone whom she shared her minority status with was the primary motivator nor did she express that she wanted to drop out entirely. Overall, Eva and the other participants indicated they would welcome being connected to others with LGBTQ parents in college, but such connections were not essential. Through all stages of their academic journey, what was helpful for them in order to feel comfortable and persist was to be surrounded by
LGBTQ acceptance and have relationships with people of all identities who accepted their families.

There are many possible explanations for the discrepancies from earlier findings. They could be related to the particular participant pool of this study simply having different experiences from others, or the fact that a few years difference in age could create a significant difference in perception. Variances could also be a result of a shift in society in relation to LGBTQ awareness, perceptions, and policies. College students’ experiences in 2013 are likely to be different than those of past and future students in higher education.

Inconsistency could also be due to the fact that these participants were currently in college environments that they had self-selected based on their own needs and preferences. This may result in better experiences than others, and negative memories of the past could potentially begin to fade.

Finally, it is possible that some issues might have existed but simply not come up during the interviews. Due to the open-ended questions structured by social identity theory (focusing on sense of self, experiences, and relationships), other potential life experiences (such as trying to appear normal to the outside world) might have not been mentioned, but still could have been present in the participants’ background.

**Similar findings.** Studies have found that children with LGBTQ parents share many similar experiences and hardships (Arm, Horne, & Levitt, 2009; Bos & van Balen, 2008; Cahill & Tobias, 2007; Gartrell, Deck, Rodas, Peyser, & Banks, 2005; Goldberg, 2007; Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2012; Lick, Tornello, Riskind, Schmidt, & Patterson, 2012; Patterson, 2009) as well as values (Goldberg, 2007; Kuvalanka & Goldberg, 2009) with their parents and others who
identify as LGBTQ. This study was consistent with participants’ personal experiences and values, as well as to their belief that these were relatable to LGBTQ people’s experiences and values. Similar to Goldberg (2007) and Kuvalanka and Goldberg’s (2009) studies, the participants of this study considered themselves more open-minded in relation to issues such as diversity, sexuality, gender norms, etc. Michelle stated, “Children who have LGBT parents are generally speaking—this is a big blanket statement—more open-minded because they have not been raised in what society considers to be a traditional family.” As with Cahill and Tobias (2007), Goldberg (2007), and Patterson’s (2009) studies, some participants in this study endured bullying and harassment, primarily in elementary and middle school, due to their family structure. Furthermore, Gartrell et al. (2005) found that almost half of the ten-year-olds they surveyed who had lesbian mothers were subjected to anti-gay rhetoric in school, and four of the nine participants of this study (44%) reported being personally targeted with homophobic sentiments in elementary and middle school.

Rosenfeld (2010) found that grade retention was not an issue for children who were raised by same-sex couples. This study was consistent; grade retention never surfaced as an issue for the participants of this study, nor did the sexual orientation of the participants’ parents appear to impact their well-being in regards to academic outcomes. However, these were not directly measured in the study.

Wainright, Russell, and Patterson (2004) found that children with same-sex parents were not impacted with regards to their ability to relate to others. This study was primarily consistent, as most participants indicated no difficulty in terms of relating to others. General socialization and peer-relatability was challenging for a small number participants during the stages when they
were being bullied. Owen was the only clear outlier. He was never bullied, but throughout school he had “some difficulty socially,” which he had “in some ways blamed … on having two moms.” He stated “That [blame] was not necessarily fair though, in retrospect,” as he believed there were in fact “a number of factors” connected to his ability to relate to others (including a non-verbal learning disability).

Welsh (2011) examined 13- to 18-year-olds who grew up with same-sex parents and found they had unique family concepts, had to unravel their self-identity opposed to their family’s identity, had to come out about their families, faced tough external challenges, and needed to find common community. This study was consistent, as the 18- to 21-year-old participants mentioned similar perspectives and experiences to various degrees. In this study, the participants felt that family should not be defined solely by heteronormative standards; however, most were insistent that while unique, their families were not very different from those that were considered “traditional.” It was during their early teen years that many of the participants recalled facing more challenges, feeling a stronger desire to connect with others who had LGBTQ parents, and often becoming more open about their parents. It was generally closer to the end of high school or in college when the participants felt others were seeing them more as individuals, opposed to as the children of LGBQ parents.

**New discoveries.** This was the first study to ask college students with LGBQ parents to examine their entire educational experience in relation to their identity. This study invited them to describe their experiences, compare the different stages of school, and make meaning of their journeys. The students themselves noted how their individual experiences were shaped by
numerous situational and environmental factors that were unique to their lives. Even so, common themes emerged, as have new discoveries.

The earlier stages of the educational journey were generally more difficult for these students with LGBQ parents. The fear of negative reactions or consequences was the biggest challenge some faced; most chose to stay private about their parents’ identity for various amounts of time. Middle school was found to be the stage when participants were most likely to be teased and made to feel different by their peers. Amy stated, “God, middle school is so rough, I don’t know how people live through it.”

The participants all got to a stage when they felt they had to stop caring about what others thought about their families. This attitude often helped them develop self-determination but did not necessarily indicate a new level of “confidence,” as some were open about their families and tried to exude confidence long before they stopped caring about what people thought. Getting to this point helped free the students from other’s judgment, many began to have an easier time fitting in at school, and the bullying subsided. This stage was typically reached by junior year of high school.

In college, the heterosexual/cisgender children of LGBQ parents had an affinity and understanding of LGBTQ people, but this did not always correlate with a desire to be involved with the LGBTQ community. Most considered themselves part of the community based on their identity, but not all had personal connections or involvement. None of the participants indicated that they needed to be supported by LGBTQ people or LGBTQ-related services. Most expressed interest in supporting children with LGBTQ parents who might be struggling in school.
Contributions to Theory

It is important to consider how the findings of this study contribute to the various concepts derived from social identity theory (SIT). In SIT, the way an individual relates to others can be viewed based on an interpersonal-intergroup continuum, meaning whether the connection is based more on individuals’ personal compatibility or having shared group membership (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Previous studies have explored group membership for individuals with LGBQ parents (Garner, 2004; Goldberg, 2007; Goldberg et al., 2011), but none have defined a precise in-group for this population. In this study, it is equally challenging to clearly define in-group/out-group membership. Participants had all moved through life with three interrelated aspects of identity: being straight/cisgender; feeling some type of membership to the LGBTQ community (ranging from “subgroup” to “I also identify as queer”); having at least one LGBQ parent. Using all of these criteria would presumably seem like the most obvious way to define in-group for the purpose of this study; however, this is somewhat of a challenge. Being part of any group would suggest sharing experiences with additional group members, and the participants have all gone through life knowing very few (if any) other people with LGBTQ parents. In addition, Turner and Oaks (1986) suggest that in-group membership implies where one “fits in,” and there was no clear consensus for all participants, particularly as this shifted for some at different stages of their lives. When considering the contributions this study makes to social identity theory:

- in-group may be considered either:
  - individuals with LGBQ parents;
  - individuals with personal/familial connection to the LGBTQ community;
individuals who are supportive of LGBTQ issues/identities.

- out-group may be considered either:
  - individuals with heterosexual parents;
  - individuals with no personal/familial connection to the LGBTQ community;
  - individuals who are not supportive of LGBTQ issues/identities.

SIT posits that individuals desire to attain and preserve a positive self-concept (i.e., positive distinctiveness) in relation to their identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This study supports SIT in regards to positive self-concept. At the time of the interviews, all participants indicated having highly positive regards towards to their identity, and each exhibited a strong desire to combat any suggestion of undesirable traits stemming from having LGBTQ parents. The majority of participants indicated feeling internally positive with regards to their identity throughout their lives, despite the hardships they endured. Three participants discussed challenging stages where negative self-concept might have been present (questioning family’s normalcy, wondering if family was cause for social difficulties, and coming to terms with a parent coming out). However, in all of these instances the individuals eventually attained and preserved positive distinctiveness in relation to their identity and these same issues.

SIT posits that group members may display in-group favoritism towards members of their own group and have bias against members of different groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This study did not support this concept. With the exception of Michelle being the only heterosexual her LGBTQ friends would invite out to gay clubs, the children of LGBQ parents did not offer/receive preferential treatment to/from others based having a shared group membership (in
the broadest sense, having some connection to LGBTQ-identity). In addition, none of the participants displayed negative sentiments or superiority towards people with heteronormative family structures (which in this case could be considered the “out-group”). In general, participants were more likely to show relational favoritism towards people with whom they had shared ideals, not shared social identities. Michelle stated, “I look for values in people, not their sexuality.”

SIT posits that individuals can take measures to reduce the stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminatory behaviors that exist between people of different social identities (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). This study supports SIT as the children of LGBQ parents were able to effectively approach conflict by educating others and dispelling identity-based stereotypes regarding LGBTQ-led families. The participants wanted others to see them and their families in a positive light and to be treated as equals. Their ultimate hope was to be understood by people who were unfamiliar with or did not accept their family structures.

SIT posits that if one’s identity within a group is of high salience then it will remain long-standing/permanent, but if it is of low salience it is likely to evolve/change (Tajfel, 1974) or dissolve completely (Haslam, 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This study does not fully support SIT in relation to saliency and permanency. It could be argued that all of the participants’ identities as “children of one or more LGBQ parents” were highly salient at certain earlier points of their lives. However, for most the saliency of their familial identity had decreased (evolved) while individual aspects of their identity were strengthened as they grew older and eventually left their family households for college. All implied that as college students, they continued to have strong feelings of pride with regards to being the child of LGBQ parents. Many noted how the
importance of their identity in relation to their LGBQ parents is likely to continue to evolve throughout their lives. Most suspected it will continue to have less day-to-day significance as they gain more independence, but none indicated an intention to ever disassociate. Owen stated, “As I continued to grow more independent, [my parents] will become less important, but I think they will always be pretty important.”

Contributions to Practice and Practical Implications

The participants of this study faced the most challenges in elementary and middle school. The stories they shared exposed instances of isolation, alienation, misunderstanding, and bullying. The American Psychological Association (1991) urged schools to support LGBT youth in schools. However, it is just as important to consider others who might not directly identify or be assumed to be LGBTQ, but who are still directly impacted by anti-LGBTQ sentiments. At the lower educational levels, it is suggested by the researcher of this study that:

- Educators and school administrators be educated in family diversity, particularly around families with LGBTQ parents. Suggestions include: the Human Rights Campaign’s “Welcoming Schools” project and “All Children-All Families” initiative (www.hrc.org);
  Family Equality Council’s “Promoting Inclusive Schools” resource page (www.familyequality.org); COLAGE’s “Resources of Educators” resource page (http://www.colage.org/resources/#providers);
- School-wide education and inclusive measures be implemented with regards to family diversity: in the classroom; in school policy; in documents and forms that ask for parent/family information, etc. Schools need to move away from the automatic assumption that all students are being raised by a biological mother and father in
“traditional” nuclear households. Even for the youngest levels, many children’s picture books exist that include and celebrate families with LGBTQ parents. (http://booksforkidsingayfamilies.blogspot.com/);

- Educators and school administrators need to offer students with LGBTQ parents ways to connect with others who share a similar non-traditional family structure (within the school, district, state, etc.). Schools could create their own networks or connect into existing networks such as local COLAGE chapters (http://www.colage.org/colage-chapter/);

- Educators and school administrators should keep a close watch for bullying and various other forms of victimization that takes place peer-to-peer, and sometimes adult-to-child in the schools. Even if protective policies exist, it is critical to make sure that they are adhered to properly, and that swift action is taken to resolve issues where children are being negatively impacted because of the way others are treating them;

- Schools need to take a formal position in their celebration and support of family diversity. Inclusive images (e.g., pride rainbow flags, two-mom/two-dad family pictures) and words (LGBTQ-welcoming, affirming of all families, etc.) should be used frequently.

High school is the period in life where students with LGBTQ parents generally begin to feel more comfortable publicly opening up about their families, and LGBTQ students often begin to come out in terms of their own identities. At this educational level, it is important that all of the previously mentioned measures continue to take place to ensure a safe environment. Additional suggestions for high school educators and administrators include:
• Giving students the opportunities to form clubs, such as Gay-Straight Alliances, which give the entire student body an opportunity to communicate, connect, and show their support around issues related to sexuality and gender identity. Resources exist to help students start GSA’s and remain supported and connected to other GSA’s (www.gsanetwork.org and http://glsen.org/jumpstart);

• Offering opportunities for students to speak publicly about their identities, background, family, culture, etc. Provide safe environments for them to do so, where students are encouraged to speak their own truths, and can be supported by both their peers and teachers/administrators in the process of doing so. Help connect them with organization that provide speaking opportunities, such as Family Equality Council’s “The Outspoken Generation” (http://www.familyequality.org/get_involved/outspoken/);

• Creating inclusive environments that allow students, teachers, and administrators to personally come out as LGBTQ or an ally to this community, if they chose to do so;

• Finding additional ways to educate students and celebrate LGBTQ diversity. Include examples of LGBTQ people and families in lesson plans, and recognize annual events such as National Coming Out Day, Spirit Day, LGBTQ Health Awareness Week, and LGBTQ History Month.

At the college level, the needs of students with LGBQ parents have often shifted. These students (and their peers) are generally more mature, and because they have left the home they have an identity much less tied to their family structure. While suggestions for the earlier stages of education still hold true, additional suggestions for practitioners within higher education are as follows:
• Find ways to identify and connect to heterosexual/cisgender college students with LGBTQ parents who share many of the same values and experiences as LGBTQ-identified students. Create opportunities for them to share their time, opinions, experiences, and energy in efforts to create more equity and inclusion on campus;

• Keep in mind that LGBTQ-related work and support can extend far beyond the LGBTQ-identified population. Many of the students in this study felt less unique in their desire to create LGBTQ-affirming spaces once they arrived in college. This led to them pulling back in this area of advocacy, as students who were out as LGBTQ had generally taken over this work in college. Make efforts to attract and include non-LGBT students in LGBTQ-related work and support on campuses (such as straight students who have LGBTQ parents);

• Recognize and respect that for various reasons, some students with LGBTQ parents may not wish to associate with the LGBTQ community. Do not pressure them to connect, and do not assume they do not understand or appreciate LGBTQ identity and issues;

• Offer ways for students with LGBTQ parents to connect with each other, either within the specific school or region. Many college students in this study expressed interest in helping younger individuals with LGBTQ parents. Opportunities to connect with such children at earlier educational stages (through local schools, COLAGE chapters, etc.) might be of great interest to college students;

• Give college students with LGBTQ parents opportunities to help others better understand them and their families (through speakers bureaus, peer education opportunities, orientation programs, etc.);
• Work with departments such as Admissions, Financial Aid, and Alumni Relations to confirm that students with non-traditional parental structures are being taken into consideration when applying to the school, in regards to loans and scholarships, when asked questions about their parents (i.e., not automatically assuming everyone has a nuclear mother/father family structure), etc.

Limitations

This study was met with various limitations. While capturing the experiences of nine participants is sufficient for a phenomenological study, this only represents a small portion of the population. Despite having taken multiple measures to diversify the racial pool of this particular study, every college student who responded to the Call for Participants (Appendix B) identified as white and came from an exclusively white immediate family. The socioeconomic class breakdown of this participant pool was also not as diverse as would have been preferred; only one participant identified as lower-middle class, and the rest identified as having a middle- to upper-class background.

Various attempts were made to include participants with transgender parents, but no such individuals were identified or came forward for participation. Therefore, while this study attempted to capture the experience of students with LGBTQ parents, it in fact only captured experiences of students with LGBQ parents. Also, while four of the participants were raised by two moms since birth, none were raised in two dad families. It can be assumed that in the near future more college-aged students will begin to surface with two dads, transgender parents, and other diverse LGBTQ family structures. Ultimately, no variances were observed in any of the themes based on either the participants’ or their parents’ gender.
While this study explored the entire education experience of students with LGBQ parents, all participants were current students at four year colleges during the time of the interviews. This means their full academic journeys were not captured as they had yet completed school. Also, the educational experiences of individuals in the same age bracket (18-24) who were either enrolled in two-year colleges, on academic-leave, not interested or able to attend college, or had dropped out of school at some point were absent from these findings.

Finally, it is important to consider that this study asked students to reflect upon 12+ years of school experiences. It is safe to assume that in many ways, both memories and the significance of certain life experiences can fade. While reflection is an essential way to analyze the past as well as to compare various life experiences, it might not always provide complete accuracy. As the saying goes, “time heals all wounds,” and it is possible that some hardships might be minimized upon reflection. Therefore while it was highly beneficial to ask college students to compare their pre-college experiences to their current ones, this approach did not offer the most accurate representation of what these individuals experienced during their time in elementary, middle, and high school. For this reason, a similar longitudinal study that tracks students and continuously asks them to assess their present-day experiences might give a more detailed account of various stages of schooling.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

This study intended to reveal the lived educational experiences of college students with LGBQ parents. As true to phenomenology, it aimed to explore ‘what’ their experiences were, and ‘how’ they experienced them. Answering the question of ‘why’ certain outcomes might have occurred was never the goal, even if some answers did begin to unfold based on the
particular experiences that were shared. It is recommended that future studies begin to ask ‘why’ certain occurrences or themes did emerge; for example: why were some individuals bullied to the point of needing to transfer schools; why were some students able to gain confidence at earlier stages than others; why did many students indicate that relationships with others similar to them were of less importance by the time they enter college?

Past studies have touched upon the impact of individuals with LGBQ parents having a connection to the LGBTQ community (Bos & van Balen, 2008; Goldberg et al., 2011). This study asked questions about such connections/relationships and found that maintaining such connections was of less importance to the majority of participants by the time they reached college. Further exploration should be done to better understand the actual or potential value that might be gained when students with LGBTQ parents make such connections at various stages of life.

In this study, all participants were straight/cisgender but had varying degrees of shared identification with the LGBTQ community because of their family structure and upbringing. Owen and Emily identified as “queerspawn” (which Owen called a “distinct subset … that’s sort of connected”); Nick said “I would identify as queer even though I’m straight”; all but Amy indicated that in some way they were part of the LGBTQ community. Goldberg (2007) deducted that such individuals have a “bicultural” identity based on their shared membership with the LGBTQ and straight communities. Future research is recommended to explore the advantages and disadvantages for children of LGBTQ parents in relation to having a stronger bicultural identity and connection to the LGBTQ community.
Most participants implied that they did not have a hard time relating to people with straight families, but believed that others often had a hard time relating to (or understanding) their own families. Further research is recommended to better understand why this is the case, and what might allow for others to better understand LGBTQ-reared families.

Finally, the greatest amount of hardships took place for participants in elementary and middle school. It has been a number of years since the participants of this study were at these levels of school; therefore it is important that more research be done to understand the present-day experiences of children with LGBTQ parents in these educational settings. It is also important to do a more intentional needs assessment. This will help educators better understand what services can and should be provided (reactively and proactively), to better ensure a safe environment that will keep these children have positive educational experiences.

Conclusion

This has been a reflective study conducted at the college level and designed to explore what it is like for individuals with LGBQ parents to go through school. Guided by the interpretive constructionist paradigm, the themes that emerged from this study were based on the truths of this specific sample-set (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The findings offer information that can be considered in order to help students with LGBQ parents have a positive educational experience. However, it is important to note that the themes that were uncovered were based on a specific group of students during a particular snapshot in time. If this study were to be replicated with US college students from the past or future, findings would likely be significantly different considering the continuously evolving social climate around LGBTQ issues.
At the end of the interview process, all nine participants offered their appreciation to the researcher for giving them the opportunity to reflect upon how their educational journey was impacted due to having LGBQ parents. Most suggested this was the first time they had been given an opportunity to analyze how this social identity had impacted their school journey, sense of self, and relationships with others. More attention needs to be given to this oftentimes invisible community of individuals who have unique experiences and perspectives to share, as well as a strong desire to bring more acceptance and equity into the world.
References


### Appendix A

#### Terminology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cisgender</td>
<td>The opposite of transgender (i.e., non-transgender); when one's gender-identity matches up with the sex one was assigned at birth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COLAGE</td>
<td>A national organization serving children with LGBTQ parents; acronym stands for &quot;Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families Like Mine</td>
<td>A (now defunct) organization that spun off of a book with the same title (A. Garner, 2004), focusing on children with LGBTQ parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Equality Council</td>
<td>A national organization focused on changing attitudes and policies for the benefit of LGBTQ families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heteronormative</td>
<td>Assumption that heterosexuality and gender-normativity are the 'norms,' placing a lesser value on anything 'queer'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homophobia</td>
<td>A range of negative sentiments and attitudes towards homosexuality/homosexuals, or towards the greater LGBTQ community. Can be “external” (coming from the outside world) or “internal” (that a person might possess towards themselves and in relation to their own identity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intentionally queer families</td>
<td>Families intentionally formed by individuals who identified as LGBTQ, where children most likely came into the family through adoption, insemination, surrogacy, or some other non-traditional means</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTE:** In this study, the straight/cisgender participants were also referred to as "non-LGBT" to recognize that they might chose identify as queer for personal, cultural, familial, or political reasons (which some did).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>LGBTQ families</strong></th>
<th>Families that have at least one member who identifies as LGBTQ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Out/Coming Out/Out of the Closet</strong></td>
<td>When someone tells other people an aspect of their identity that was previously unknown or hidden (ex: “I’m gay”; “I have two moms”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Queer</strong></td>
<td>A term sometimes used interchangeably with the expressions gay/LGBTQ/etc., or used to describe something/someone outside of the 'norm.' Some heterosexual/cisgender people also identify as queer due to their personal or political believes (which might be considered non-traditional or radical), because they are a member of an LGBTQ family, or for various other reasons. This term has historical negative connotations, but has been reclaimed to be used in a positive way by many in the LGBTQ community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Queer Spawn</strong></td>
<td>A term coined by the national organization COLAGE (Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere) to describe individuals with one or more LGBTQ parent(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>R Family Vacations</strong></td>
<td>A company founded in 2003 that creates vacation opportunities specifically catered to gays, lesbians, and their families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Second Generation</strong></td>
<td>Individuals who are LGBTQ-identified and also have one or more LGBTQ parent(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Straight Families</strong></td>
<td>Families that do not have any immediate members who identify on the LGBTQ spectrum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Straight</strong></td>
<td>For the purposes of this study, a term used to define people who are sexually attracted to members of the opposite sex (male/female)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

Call for Participants

Are you a college student who has LGBTQ parent(s), and you do not personally identify as LGBT?

Consider taking part in this study!

A study is being conducted to gain insight into what it is like to be a non-LGBT college student who grew up with at least one parent who is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer (LGBTQ).

In order to participate, individuals must be between the ages of 18-24 and proficient in English. Participants must have grown up with at least one parent who identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer (LGBTQ). Participants must not personally identify as LGBT. Participants must be currently enrolled full-time students living away at a 4-year college or university in the United States, and have already completed at least one entire semester at that same institution. All qualified individuals are encouraged to apply, regardless of race, ethnicity, class, religion, (dis)ability, or national origin.

The study consists of two interviews, which may be conducted either by phone, Skype®, or in person. The first interview focuses on the participant’s life history and present day experience in relation to the topic (approximately 60-90 minutes); the second interview will allow the participant to reflect upon the meaning of the experiences (approximately 60 minutes). Participants who complete both interviews will receive one $25 gift card to either Amazon.com or iTunes.

If you or someone you know would like to participate in this study or learn more, please email bourdon.t@husky.neu.edu or call 617-627-5770. Selection for the study is not guaranteed, but will be determined during a brief 5-10 minute intake call.

Confidentiality is guaranteed, and participants’ names will never be shared with others or used in the published results.

This study is conducted by Thomas Bourdon, an EdD doctoral candidate at Northeastern University. This study has been approved by Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board for research ethics (IRB# ----).
Appendix C

Application for IRB Approval

APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL FOR USE OF HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH

Before completing this application, please read the Application Instructions and Policies and Procedures for Human Research Protections to understand the responsibilities for which you are accountable as an investigator in conducting research with human participants. The document, Application Instructions, provides additional assistance in preparing this submission. **Incomplete applications will be returned to the investigator. You may complete this application online and save it as a Word document.**

If this research is related to a grant, contract proposal or dissertation, a copy of the full grant/contract proposal/dissertation must accompany this application.

Please carefully edit and proof read before submitting the application. Applications that are not filled out completely and/or have any missing or incorrect information will be returned to the Principal Investigator.

**REQUIRED TRAINING FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS**

Under the direction of the Office of the Vice Provost for Research, Northeastern University is now requiring completion of the NIH Office of Extramural Research training for all human subject research, regardless of whether or not investigators have received funding to support their project.

The online course titled "Protecting Human Research Participants" can be accessed at the following url: [http://phrp.nihtraining.com/users/login.php](http://phrp.nihtraining.com/users/login.php). **This requirement will be effective as of November 15, 2008 for all new protocols.**

Principal Investigators, student researchers and key personnel (participants who contribute substantively to the scientific development or execution of a project) must include a copy of their certificate of completion for this web-based tutorial with the protocol submission.

- Certificate(s) Attached
- Certificate(s) submitted previously – on file with the NU’s Office of Human Subject Research Protection

A. Investigator Information
Principal Investigator (PI cannot be a student)  ____ Dr. Tova Sanders ________

Investigator is: NU Faculty ___ x ___ NU Staff ___ Other __________________________

College ______ Northeastern University College of Professional Studies ____________

Department ______ Education (EdD Doctorate Program) _____________________________

Address ________ 41 BV College of Professional Studies, Boston MA 02115 __________

Telephone __ 202-549-3240 Email ______ t.sanders@neu.edu ________________

Is this student research? YES _X_ NO ___ If yes, please provide the following information:

Student Name ________ Thomas Bourdon ________ Undergrad ___ MA/MS ___ PhD _x_ (EdD)

Mailing Address ______ 48 Magnavista Dr., Haverhill, MA 01830 ____________

Anticipated graduation date: September 2013

Telephone __ 617-627-5770 (w) Primary Email ______ bourdon.t@husky.neu.edu _______

Cell phone __ 818-694-9909 (c) Secondary Email ______ tombourdon@hotmail.com _______

B. Protocol Information

Title ___ A Phenomenological Study of non-LGBT College Students with LGBTQ Parents ___

Projected # subjects ___ 6-10 ______

Approx. begin date of project September 10, 2012 ___ Approx. end date April 30, 2012 ___

month, day, year month, day, year

It is the policy of Northeastern University that no activity involving human subjects be undertaken until those activities have been reviewed and approved by the University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB).
C.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Will Participants Be:</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children (&lt;18)</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeastern University Students?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutionalized persons?</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prisoners?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitively Impaired Persons?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non or Limited English Speaking Persons?</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People Living outside the USA?</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnant Women/Fetuses?</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other? (Please provide detail)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</table>

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<tr>
<th>Does the Project Involve:</th>
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<th>No</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blood Removal?</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigational drug/device?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Audiotapes/videotapes?</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Please answer each of the following questions using non-technical language. Missing or incomplete answers will delay your review while we request the information.

D. What are the goals of this research? Please state your research question(s) and related hypotheses.

The goal of this research is to examine an unexplored phenomenon: the experience of being a college student currently enrolled in an institution of higher education within the United States who does not personally identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT), but who grew up with at least one parent who is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ).

The following question guides the direction of this study:

“What is the lived experience of being a non-LGBT college student in the United States who has at least one parent that is LGBTQ?”
Sub – Question #1: What are the perspectives of non-LGBT college students who have LGBTQ parent(s) in regards to their sense of self?

Sub – Question #2: What are the perspectives of non-LGBT college students who have LGBTQ parent(s) in regards to their family structure having an impact on their school experience?

Sub – Question #3: What are the experiences of non-LGBT individuals who have LGBTQ parent(s) when attempting to create relationships in college?

There is no hypothesis for this phenomenological study.

E. Provide a brief summary of the purpose of the research in non-technical language.

In the US, it is estimated that there are millions of individuals with at least one parent who identifies as LGBTQ. There is no current research that adequately explores what these students are experiencing in higher education. The purpose of this research is to give insight into the experiences of non-LGBT US college students who have at least one parent that is LGBTQ.

Information learned from this study will hopefully help individuals in the field of higher education better understand the realities associated with being a non-LGBT college student who has LGBTQ parent(s). If it is discovered that these individuals face particular challenges, this newfound knowledge will hopefully assist in improving their college experience. Finally, the potential benefits to society include a greater understanding of what it is like to an individual who has LGBTQ parent(s), which could improve the social and political climate in the future for both the children and parents with this family dynamic.

F. Identify study personnel on this project. Include name, credentials, role, and organization affiliation.

*Principal Investigator - Tova Sanders Ph.D; Northeastern University faculty located in Northeastern University College of Continuing Studies – will have minimal access to data

*Student Researcher - Thomas Bourdon, M.Ed; Director of the Tufts University Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) Center and doctoral (EdD) student in Northeastern University College of Continuing Studies.

*Professional Transcriptionist – To be confirmed. Each time interview transcription is mentioned in the study, the possibility of utilizing a professional transcriptionist is also mentioned. If used, the professional transcriptionist will be asked to sign a “Transcriber Confidentiality Statement in a Research Study” Form (Appendix A).
G. Identify other organizations or institutions that are involved. Attach current Institutional Review Board (IRB) approvals or letters of permission as necessary.

While the Student Researcher (Thomas Bourdon) is an administrator at Tufts University, the Call for Participants (Appendix B) will not go out through Tufts, therefore IRB approval is not required from Tufts.

H. Recruitment Procedures

| Describe the participants you intend to recruit. Provide all inclusion and exclusion criteria. Include age range, number of subjects, gender, ethnicity/race, socio-economic level, literacy level and health (as applicable) and reasons for exempting any groups. Describe how/when/by whom inclusion/exclusion criteria will be determined. |

Participants must speak English proficiently and be current undergraduate students at four-year colleges/universities in the United States. Participants must be between age 18-24, have completed at least one semester at the institution where they are currently enrolled, and be living away at college (and not with their family) during the academic year. No preference will be given in terms of a school’s size, affiliation, being public vs. private, etc.

Participants must not personally identify as LGBT, but have at least one parent who is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer (LGBTQ). Attempts will be made to uncover a variety of experiences, therefore in addition to seeking out a diverse mix in terms of participants’ ethnicity/race, gender, socio-economic level, geographical region, etc. Interested individuals would only be excluded from participation if they seemed completely disconnected from their LGBTQ-parent(s), which would make it difficult for them to draw from experiences/relationships based on the focus of this study. 6-10 participants will be asked to participate.

The Call for Participants (Appendix B) states the criteria, and includes the statement: “Selection for the study is not guaranteed, but will be determined during a brief 5-10 minute intake call.”

During the intake call, the Student Researcher will give a brief overview of the project, and then ask criteria-based questions (self-recording the participants’ answers). After determining if the individual would be an adequate candidate, the Student Researcher will state whether or not the individual qualifies for the study.

Describe the procedures that you will use to recruit these participants. Be specific. How will potential subjects be identified? Who will ask for participation? If you intend to recruit using letters, posters, fliers, ads, website, email etc., copies must be included as attachments for stamped approval. Include scripts for intended telephone recruitment.
Targeted recruitment (via a Call for Participants, Appendix B) will take place with the assistance of organizations and groups that focus on LGBTQ identities/parents/families (such as COLAGE, Family Equality Council, and Rainbow Families), as well as through the Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals (i.e., ‘Consortium’; consisting of student affairs administrators at over 200 colleges whose role is to support the LGBTQ community).

If willing to do so, the Call for Participants will be sent out by the above organizations electronically (via email to their respective listservs). It is also possible that some of these organizations might post the information on their website.

Administrators will receive an email (containing the CfP) from the student investigator, simply asking them to forward the CfP to members of their respective institutions, should their organization’s policies allow them to do so. The email to administrators on the Consortium listserv will ask them to forward the CfP to students at their respective institutions (should their school’s policies allow them to do so). LGBT-related IRB-approved studies are commonly forwarded to students by Consortium members in this manner.

The Call for Participants gives a brief explanation of the purpose of the study, participant criteria, compensation, and contact information.

What remuneration, if any, is offered?

A $25 gift card to either Amazon.com or iTunes (participant’s choice) will be offered to participants who complete the study.

I. Consent Process

Describe the process of obtaining informed consent*. Be specific. How will the project and the participants’ role be presented to potential participants? By whom? When? Where? Having the participant read and sign a consent statement is done only after the researcher provides a detailed oral explanation and answers all questions. Please attach a copy of informed consent statements that you intend to use, if applicable.

If your study population includes non-English speaking people, translations of consent information are necessary. Describe how information will be translated and by whom. You may wait until the consent is approved in English before having it translated.

I will be interviewing English speaking people.

As stated in section H (Recruitment Procedures), the researcher will give a detailed oral explanation of the scope of the project and the role of the participant during the intake call.
I will use an unsigned consent form. Participants will receive the unsigned consent form prior to the interview. At the start of the interview, we will go over the form. I will answer any questions the participant may have. I will then ask them to verbally consent on the recording.

If your population includes children, prisoners, people with limited mental capacity, language barriers, problems with reading or understanding, or other issues that may make them vulnerable or limit their ability to understand and provide consent, describe special procedures that you will institute to obtain consent appropriately. If participants are potentially decisionally impaired, how will you determine competency?

N/A

*If incomplete disclosure during the initial consent process is essential to carrying out the proposed research, please provide a detailed description of the debriefing process. Be specific. When will full disclosure of the research goals be presented to subjects (e.g., immediately after the subject has completed the research task(s) or held off until the completion of the study’s data collection)? By whom? Please attach a copy of the written debriefing statement that will be given to subjects.

N/A

J. Study Procedures

Provide a detailed description of all activities the participant will be asked to do and what will be done to the participants. Include the location, number of sessions, time for each session, and total time period anticipated for each participant, including long term follow up.

Qualitative data will be collected through interviews conducted by the Student Researcher either in person, over the phone, or via ‘Skype®’ (an online program which allows people to converse remotely, similar to a telephone conversation, but also offering the ability for individuals to see one another).

After the initial intake call (approximately 5-10 minutes), each participant will be interviewed two separate times. The first interview will focus on the participant’s life history and present day experience in relation to the topic (lasting approximately 60-90 minutes); the second interview will allow the participant to reflect upon the meaning of the experiences (lasting approximately 60 minutes). Each participant will be asked to complete both interviews within a 3-7 day period.

The transcripts and initial data codes/interpretations from both the first and second interview will be emailed to a secure email address provided by the participant within one
month after the second interview. The participant will then have one week to review the information and provide any feedback in regards to the validity, or make requests for alterations.

A thank you card and the $25 Amazon.com or iTunes gift card will be mailed to each participant two weeks after the second interview is complete (and the member checking period has lapsed).

Who will conduct the experimental procedures, questionnaires, etc? Where will this be done? Attach copies of all questionnaires, interview questions, tests, survey instruments, links to online surveys, etc.

The interviews will be conducted by the Student Researcher (Thomas Bourdon) either in person, over the phone, or via Skype®. When done over the phone or Skype®, the Student Researcher will conduct all interviews in the secure settings of either his work or home office, and the participant will be asked to also be in a location where privacy and concentration can be maintained. If there are any instances where an in-person interview is possible, these would also be conducted in a private setting to ensure confidentiality and the ability for both the researcher and interview to concentrate on the interview.

The script for the Intake Call, Interviews #1 & #2 (which include the interview questions) is attached (see Interview Protocol Form, Appendix D).

K. Risks

Identify possible risks to the participant as a result of the research. Consider possible psychological harm, loss of confidentiality, financial, social, or legal damages as well as physical risks. What is the seriousness of these risks and what is the likelihood that they may occur?

Appropriate measure will be taken to ensure confidentiality (see Section L: Confidentiality). As participants will be discussing personal details about their life, there is the slight chance of potential (non-physical) discomfort, but the risk of this is minimal.

Describe in detail the safeguards that will be implemented to minimize risks. What follow-up procedures are in place if harm occurs? What special precautions will be instituted for vulnerable populations?

Participants will be informed that if they feel uncomfortable replying to any of the questions that are asked, they are free to decline from answering. They will be also told both verbally and in the Consent Form (Appendix C) that they are free to withdraw from the study at any time.
Every effort possible will be made to protect participant confidentiality, and no other risks (financial, social, physical, etc.) seem likely based on participation in this study.

**L. Confidentiality**

Describe in detail the procedures that will be used to maintain anonymity or confidentiality during collection and entry of data. Who will have access to data? How will the data be used, now and in the future?

Any information that is obtained in connections with this study and that can be identified with an individual will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with the participant’s expressed request/permission or as required by law. No names will be associated with any interview information; any information that could be used to identify a participant will be altered to protect their confidentiality; the recording of the interview will not be labeled with the participant’s name, but rather a pseudonym; should a professional transcriptionist be used, a Transcriber Confidentiality Statement (Appendix A) will be used; all data files will be encrypted and password protected, and only the Principal Investigator (Professor Tova Sanders) and Student Researcher on this project (Thomas Bourdon) will have access to the files.

The data will be used for the Student Researcher’s doctoral thesis project, and potentially for future journal articles, books, presentations, or research. Even in these potential instances, confidentiality will be kept for all participants.

Information regarding confidentiality will be shared with all participants prior to the interview process, both in the Consent Form and verbally.

How and where will data be stored? When will data, including audiotapes and videotapes, be destroyed? If data is to be retained, explain why. Will identifiers or links to identification be destroyed? When? Signed consent documents must be retained for 3 years following the end of the study. Where and how will they be maintained?

Each interview will be audio-recorded by an electronic application called “AudioMemos” on two separate devices (the Student Researcher’s iPad and iPhone) to ensure the audio is captured. AudioMemos has no limit to audio-length, and electronic recordings can be transferred to a computer as mp4 or .wav files.

The electronic recordings of the interviews and all other electronic documents will be downloaded and then saved to the Student Researcher’s personal USB flash drive, personal external hard drive, and personal (online) iCloud storage account. All files will be encrypted and password-protected.

Interviews will be transcribed by one of two methods:
1) Directly by the student researcher, with the assistance of the computer software program “Dragon Naturally Speaking,” or
2) By a professional transcriptionist who will be required to sign a “Transcriber Confidentiality Statement in a Research Study” (Appendix A).

Transcripts will be saved in the same secure manner as the electronic recordings. The only other person who would have access to original files and actual names would be the Principal Investigator (Dr. Sanders), should there be a need.

Any written documents will be kept in the locked desk drawer at the home of the Student Researcher (48 Magnavista Dr., Haverhill, MA 01830) during the period when the investigation is taking place. After the thesis project is complete, any hard-copy materials containing confidential interviewee information will be destroyed, and any electronic documents saved on the iCloud account will be deleted. All remaining electronic data stored on the student researcher’s USB flash drive and personal external hard drive will remain untouched, and kept in a locked safe in the home of the Student Researcher. These remaining data and documents will be destroyed 5 years following the completion of the study.

M. If your research is HIPAA-protected, please complete the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Access to PHI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Describe the procedure that will be used for allowing individuals to access their PHI or, alternatively, advising them that they must wait until the end of the study to review their PHI.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N/A

N. Benefits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What benefits can the participant reasonably expect from his/her involvement in the research? If none, state that. What are potential benefits to others?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant: A $25 Amazon.com or iTunes gift card, which will be mailed to the individual two weeks after the second interview is completed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society: Potential benefits to society include a better understanding of what it is like to be a non-LGBT identified college student who has LGBTQ parent(s), which could improve the social and political climate for both the children and parents with this family dynamic in the United States in the future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Researcher: Successful completion of this study will allow the Student Researcher to complete the EdD (Doctor of Education) program at Northeastern University.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

O. Attachments
Identify attachments that have been included and those that are not applicable (n/a).

| ApxB | Copy of fliers, ads, posters, emails, web pages, letters for recruitment * |
| ApxD | Scripts of intended telephone conversations* |
| n/a  | Copies of IRB approvals or letters of permission from other sites |
| ApxC | Informed Consent or Informed Consent and Health Information Use and Disclosure Authorization* |
| n/a  | Debriefing Statement* |
| ApxD | Copies of all instruments, surveys, focus group or interview questions, tests, etc. |
| (faxed) | Signed Assurance of Principal Investigator Form (required) |
| ApxE | NIH Human Subject Training Certificate(s) (required if not already on file at HSRP) |
| ApxA | Transcriber Confidentiality Statement in a Research Study |

*(Approved forms must be stamped by the IRB before use)*

P. Health Care Provision During Study

Please check the applicable line:

- [x] I have read the description of HIPAA “health care” within Section 3.0 of the Policies & Procedures for Human Research Protection. I am not a HIPAA-covered health care provider and no health care will be provided in connection with this study.

- [ ] I am a HIPAA-covered health care provider or I will provide health care in connection with this study as described in Section 3.0 of the Policies & Procedures for Human Research Protection. This health care is described above under “Study Procedures,” and the Informed Consent and Health Information Use and Disclosure Authorization form will be used with all prospective study participants.

If you have any questions about whether you are a HIPAA-covered health care provider, please contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection at n.regina@neu.edu or (617) 373-4588.

**Please return the completed application to:**

Nan C. Regina, Director  
Human Subject Research Protection  
960 Renaissance Park  
Northeastern University  
Boston, MA 02115-5000  
Tel: 617.373.7570; Fax: 617.373.4595  
n.regina@neu.edu
The application and accompanying materials may be sent as email attachments or in hard copy. A signed Assurance of Principal Investigator Form may be sent via fax or in hard copy.
Appendix D

Interview Protocol Form

Interview Protocol

Institution: Northeastern University; 360 Huntington Avenue; Boston, Massachusetts 02115

Interviewee:

Interviewer: Thomas Bourdon    Date:

Location of Interview:

************************

Intake Call

Thank you for calling and expressing interest in this study. My name is Tom Bourdon, and I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University. This research project is my doctoral thesis project, and the goal of the study is to explore the experience of being a college student who does not personally identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT), but who has at least one parent who is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ).

As the Student Researcher, I am also the person who will be conducting the interviews as well as the intake calls, like the one we are doing right now.

Today, I’d like to ask you just a few criteria-based questions, to determine if you qualify as a participant, and if so, I’ll give you a more detailed explanation as to the scope of this project. At that point, if you’re interested in proceeding, we can talk about setting up the interview time. Sound good?

- Could you please state your age?
- Are you a currently enrolled college student?
  - Where? For how long have you been a student there?
  - And during the school year, do you live away at college, or with your family?
- This study calls for participants who have at least one parent who is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer. Can you tell me how you qualify in regards to this?
- Based on what is being explored, it is also important that participants do not personally identify as LGBT. May I ask what your sexual orientation is? And can you also confirm that you do not identify as transgender?

Thank you. I’m happy to say that you meet all of the criteria in regards to participation in this study. Now I would like to tell you a bit more about the scope of this project.
This is a phenomenological study. The main question being asked is: “What is the lived experience of being a non-LGBT college student in the United States who has at least one parent that is LGBTQ?” There are a few reasons I’ve chosen to do this study: First off, I’m the Director of the LGBT Center at Tufts University, and I’m very passionate about LGBT-related issues. Secondly, I’m also a gay father, and I am curious to find out what the experiences are for children with LGBTQ parents as they grow older. The third reason I’ve chosen to do this particular study is because there have been no previous studies focusing on the college experience of individuals with LGBTQ parents, and I think it’s about time we start to explore this topic. The reason I chose to only focus exclusively on non-LGBT individuals is because other studies have shown that when it comes to individuals with LGBTQ parents, those who do not identify as LGBT often have different experiences than those who personally identify as LGBT.

This is a two-interview process. In the first interview, I’ll collect some basic background information, ask questions that focus on the period prior to participants entering college, and then inquire more specifically about the college experience. The first interview will last between 60-90 minutes. During the second interview, I’ll ask follow-up questions based on information already provided in the first interview, honing in on the meaning participants make of certain things they spoke about. The second interview should last just about 1 hour. All responses will be kept anonymous—identifying information would never be published. Participants who complete both interviews will receive a $25 gift card to either Amazon.com or iTunes.

That is a very brief overview of the study. Do you have any questions in regards to the research itself?

With that said, are you interesting in proceeding as a participant in this study?

Fantastic, what I’d like to do now is set up the times for us to do the two interviews. Considering your location, I think it is best that we do it (by phone, Skype®, in person)—do you agree?

Good.

Both interviews need to take place within a 3-7 day period of each other. Like I mentioned, the first interview will last a maximum of 2 hours, and the second one should only take about 1 hour. What times work for you?

Great. I’m going to email you an electronic copy of the Consent to Participate Form, which tells you a bit more about the study and answers some common questions people often have in regards to research. I ask that you please read it over, sign it, and fax, scan/email, or mail it to me so that I receive it no later than 24 hours before our first interview. If you have any questions or concerns before signing, you are of course free to contact me. Does that work?

Thank you. Before we wrap up this call, I’d just like to ask you to consider if you know of any other college students who also might meet the criteria for this study, and be interested in participating? If so, I would definitely appreciate it if you tell them about this study, and give them my contact information should they wish to participate.
Great, so that is it for now. I look forward to our first interview on ___. [If by phone/Skype®] I will call you at this time, should I use the same phone number? I look forward to it...have a good day!

Interview #1

Part 1: Introductory Protocol

You have been selected to speak with me today because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about the experience of being a college student.

This research project focuses on the experience of college students who do not identify as LGBT, but have LGBTQ parents. Through this study, we hope to gain more insight into how students such as you perceive your sense of self, what impact your family structure might have on your school experience, and your experiences connecting with others.

Hopefully this study will allow us to better understand and support college students who have LGBTQ parents and a non-heteronormative family structure.

Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. I will also be taking written notes during the interview. Only I and possibly a professional transcriptionist will be privy to the audio files. If a transcriptionist is used, that person will have signed a confidentiality statement, and will also only be provided with the recording labeled by pseudonym, meaning they will never even know your name, to maintain confidentiality. The audio files will be destroyed within two weeks after they are transcribed. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only pseudonyms will be used when quoting from the transcripts. Only your pseudonym will be attached to the transcript.

I would like to begin recording this session now, is that alright with you?

To meet our human subjects requirements at the university, participants have to read and sign the Consent to Participate Form which was provided to you, and send me the signed document prior to the first interview. Thank you for having already done that. Just to review, this document which you signed states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions or concerns about the interview process or this form?

This is the first of two interviews. We have planned for this interview to last between 60-90 minutes. We will then do a follow-up interview 3-7 days from now, which will last approximately 60 minutes. Today, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this time?
Part 2: Interview Introduction

The intent of this study is to gain better understanding into what it means to be a college student who does not identify as LGBT, but has parent(s) who are LGBTQ. The method of inquiry that is being used in this study is an adaption of Seidman’s (2006) three-series interview approach to qualitative research. In this 3-tiered approach: the first step is to explore the participant’s background and the details of the experience which is being investigated; the second step is to examine the current experience (which in this case would be your time in college); the third step is to ask the participant to reflect upon the meaning of the experience.

Seidman (2006) stated that “As long as a structure is maintained that allows participants to reconstruct and reflect on their experience within the context of their lives, alternatives to the three-interview structure can be explored” (p. 21). In this study, we will be merging these steps into a structure with two (rather than three) interviews.

Today’s interview will cover the first two steps. I will ask you focused questions about your life history and experiences prior to college, as well as questions directly related to your time in college.

The second and final interview will cover the third step of the Seidman (2006) approach, allowing for you to reflect upon the meaning of your experiences. Following Seidman’s recommendations, the final interview will take place 3-7 days from now.

Are you ready to begin?

Part 3: Questioning

Focused Life History

Objective: “To put the participant’s experience in context by asking him or her to tell as much as possible about him or herself in light of the topic up to the present time” (Seidman, 2006, p.17).

Biographical Background

I’d like to start by asking you some basic questions in regards to your biographical background. This part should only take between 5-10 minutes.

1. Please share with me the basic information about yourself and your immediate family:
   a. Parents and immediate family members
   b. Parents’ educational background and employment
   c. Siblings’ age and educational background
   d. Race and ethnicity
   e. Gender identity/expression
f. Sexual orientation
g. Religious background
h. Socio-economic class identification

2. Please share information about where you grew up:
   a. Hometown location:
      i. Description by race/ethnicity, socio-economic class, religion, etc.
      ii. Family’s place in community
   b. High School:
      i. Type of school
      ii. Description by race/ethnicity, socio-economic class, religion, etc.
      iii. Your place in high school (athlete, student government, nerd, popular, etc.)
      iv. Climate in of LGBT issues/acceptance?

3. Please share information about your college/university:
   a. Type of school
   b. Description by race/ethnicity, socio-economic class, religion, etc.
   c. What made you chose to go there
   d. What are you studying (or thinking you’ll study)
   e. Your place in college
   f. Climate in of LGBT issues/acceptance?

Life History in Relation to Topic

I am now going to ask you questions focused on the topic of the study, exploring your life before you entered college.

Description of Self

1. Prior to entering college, how would you have personally described yourself, in relation to being a non-LGBT individual who had LGBTQ parent(s)?
   a. To what degree were others aware of your family structure?
      i. How did this impact the way other people saw you?
      ii. How did this impact your own sense of self?

School Experience

2. What was it like to be a student with LGBTQ parent(s) prior to college?
   a. Can you recall a specific time when this had an impact on your (pre-college) school experience?

Relationships/Membership

3. Can you tell me about your connection with others who had LGBTQ parents prior to college?
4. Is there a time you can recall when your family structure impacted your ability to connect with people whose families were completely ‘straight’ prior to college?

5. How did your family structure impact your ability to connect with LGBTQ individuals prior to college?

6. How did your family structure impact your ability to ‘fit in’ at school, prior to college?

Details of the Experience

I am now going to ask you questions that will relate to you as a college student.

Description of Self

7. How do you now describe yourself, in relation to being a non-LGBT individual who has LGBTQ parent(s)?
   a. To what degree are people at school aware of your family structure?
      i. How does this impact the way other people see you?
      ii. How does this currently impact your own sense of self?

School Experience

8. What is it like to be a college student with LGBTQ parent(s)?
   a. Can you recall for me a time when your family structure has had an impact on your college experience?

Relationship/Membership

9. Can you tell me about your experience connecting with other students who have LGBTQ parents while in college?

10. In college, to what degree does your family structure impact your ability to relate to people whose families are completely ‘straight’?

11. How has your family structure impacted your ability to connect with college students who identify as LGBTQ?

12. How does your family structure impact your overall ability to ‘fit in’ at college?

Part 4: Wrap-up
That concludes the questions for today’s interview. Before we wrap up, do you have any questions?

I want to confirm the time for the next/final interview: ___

Thank you so much for your participation, and I will call you for the final interview on __.

**************************************

Interview # 2

Reflect on the meaning

Objective: To encourage participants to reflect on the meaning of their experience…the intellectual and emotional connections between the participants’ work and life.” (Seidman, 2006, p. 18)

Part 1: Introductory Protocol

Today’s interview will allow us to follow up on questions from the first interview. Similar to last time, I will be audio recording this interview. Are you ready to begin?

Part 2: Questioning

1) You talked about how you saw yourself as a student with LGBTQ parent(s) before college, compared to how you see yourself now. What do you think are the factors that contribute to that shift?
   a. Where do you see your sense of identity heading in the future?
2) Given what told me about your experiences in school prior to college, and more recently when in college, tell me what you understand about the experience of being a student with LGBTQ parents.
3) Given what you said about your connection to others with LGBTQ parents prior to college and now that you are in college, what significance do you place on these relationships?
4) I asked you about what impact your family structure has on your ability to connect with people whose families are completely “straight,” both pre-college and now that you are in college. Considering your personal experiences, tell me what you understand in regards to the impact.
5) Given what you said about your connecting with LGBTQ individuals, thinking back to pre-college as well as your experience in college, what significance do you place on having a connection with LGBT individuals?
6) Considering what you said about “fitting in” at school before college, and now that you are in college, tell me what you understand about what it is like for someone with LGBTQ parents in regards to ‘fitting in.’

Part 3: Wrap-up

Thank you, that concludes the interview questions for this final interview.

If I come across a need to ask any follow-up questions, which would most likely only be the case if I felt clarification was needed in regards to one of your responses, would it be alright for me to contact you?

Sometime over the next month, I will email you word-for-word transcripts and my initial interpretations of both interviews. If you chose, you can review the information, and you will have one week to provide me with any feedback, alterations, or corrections. Can you please confirm the email address you would like for me to email the transcripts to?

Also, I would like to send you a $25 gift card to either Amazon.com or iTunes for your participation in this study. Which would you prefer? And can you please let me know where you would like me to mail the gift card? Great, I’ll be able to send that to you two weeks from now. And once this thesis study is complete, which will most likely be 3-6 months from now, would you like to receive an electronic copy of the document?

Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you so much for your participation in this study!

References

Appendix E

Consent Form

Northeastern University, Department of Education
Name of Investigator(s): Dr. Tova Sanders (Principal Investigator), Thomas Bourdon (Student Researcher)
Title of Project: A Phenomenological Study of non-LGBT College Students with LGBTQ Parents

Request to Participate in Research
We would like to invite you to take part in a research project. The purpose of this research is to give insight into the experiences of non-LGBT US college students who have at least one parent that is LGBTQ.

You must be at least 18 years old to be in this research project.

The study will take place at ____________ and will take about ___________. If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you participate in two interviews (conducted by Thomas Bourdon) about your life history and present day experiences in relation to having (one or more) LGBTQ parent(s).

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you for taking part in this study.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in the study. However, your answers may help us to learn more about the realities associated with being a non-LGBT college student who has LGBTQ parent(s).

Your part in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. Only the researchers will know that you participated in this study. Any reports or publications based on this research will only use pseudonyms, and will not identify you or any other participant as being part of this project.

The decision to participate in this research project is up to you. You do not have to participate and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may withdraw at any time.

You will receive a $25 gift certificate to Amazon.com or iTunes upon completion of the two interviews.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Thomas Bourdon (Tel: 818-694-9909, Email: bourdon.t@husky.neu.edu), the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Tova Sander (Northeastern University, Boston, MA, Email: t.sanders@neu.edu), the Principal Investigator.
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

You may keep this form for yourself.

Thank you.  

Thomas Bourdon