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Homosexuality and the Family

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Abstract

This study is an analysis of the social construction of lesbian and gay identities within the immediate family. The analysis draws on the insights obtained from in-depth interviews conducted with 39 individual lesbian and gay respondents and 22 parents. The thesis is organised into six chapters.

In Chapter 1, I review past work on lesbian and gay identity formation and the disclosure of a lesbian or gay identity to members of the family. I argue that past research on lesbian and gay identity formation has not paid sufficient attention to the influence of the family on sexual identity construction. I also argue that past research on lesbians and gays and the family has only focused on initial disclosure of sexual identity to parents. I suggest that we can proceed beyond these limitations by examining the social construction of lesbian and gay identities in the family by focusing on two research themes: the internal theme which explores individual sexual identity formation, coming out to parents and developments in familial relations from initial disclosure to the present; and the external theme which examines lesbian and gays experiences beyond the family, for instance, the lesbian and gay communities and work. It also considers how lesbian and gay involvement beyond the family affects parents. The research is then related to a broad theoretical framework concerning the construction and negotiation of identities in postmodernity.

The methodology for the research is explored in Chapter 2. I review etiological and structural approaches to lesbians and gays and the family and argue that if we are to consider sexual identity and family relationships, then it is best achieved through a qualitative approach based on grounded theory. This approach would focus on meaning, interaction and the negotiation of relationships between lesbians and gays and their families. The design and uses of the research tools, the sampling procedure, the pilot and main studies and data analysis are also outlined.

The findings of the research are reported in Chapters 3, 4 and 5. Chapters 3 and 4 examine the internal theme of the research. Chapter 5 explores the external theme. Finally, three conceptual themes are identified in Chapter 6, based on the

findings reported throughout the thesis. This is consistent with the grounded theory approach, which seeks to theorise on the basis of empirical data. Firstly, I suggest that individuals are active strategists in the production of postmodern identities; secondly, family relations are constructed through discourse and social practices; lastly, familial and sexual identities and relationships are constructed in wider contexts beyond the family. The chapter ends by attempting to make some recommendations for further research.

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CHAPTER 1

LESBIANS AND GAYS AND THE FAMILY

INTRODUCTION

This chapter reviews literature focusing on lesbian and gay identity formation models and the disclosure of a lesbian or gay identity to members of the family. On this basis, I suggest that we can generate an understanding of lesbian and gay identities and their relations with their immediate families. This focus would proceed beyond the limits of identity formation models and the research concerning initial disclosure to family members. This will be achieved by considering two research themes, the internal theme, which examines relationships within the family and external theme, which explores lesbian and gay experience beyond the family, for example, in the lesbian and gay communities. Research on lesbians and gays and their families will then be related to a broad theoretical framework concerning the construction and negotiation of identities and relationships and diversity within families.

LESBIAN AND GAY IDENTITY FORMATION

Introduction

There is substantial literature on lesbian and gay identity formation that attempts to understand how lesbians and gays come to define themselves. Lesbian and gay identity formation models share a number of common features. Most view the development of a lesbian and gay identity against the backdrop of a society that stigmatises homosexuality. All identify certain developments that can be ordered into stages or phases. The development of a lesbian and gay identity usually culminates in an increased desire to disclose the new identity to non-lesbian and non-gay audiences. Three themes of identity development are normally discernible: firstly, individuals discover that they have sexual attractions towards others of the same sex; secondly, there follows the process of exploring and developing these feelings into an identity that could be reflected in a lifestyle. Thirdly, there is a commitment theme, whereby an individual takes on a commitment to the new identity. This identity usually becomes one of the defining points of an individual's life.

Most of the models are broadly interactionist in that they stress the fluidity and the malleability of sexual identities (e.g., Plummer 1975; Gramick 1984). Individuals assume and construct their identities through social interaction and engagement with others. Individuals aim to construct and retain these identities and seek positive recognition for these through social interactions. Choice and human agency tend to be accentuated, which lead us away from the illness models of lesbian and gay identity. Rather, as Coleman (1981) posits, the literature contends that a lesbian or gay identity does not constitute a definable entity, but is a regular variation of sexual and erotic predilections put across in a variety of ways by a divergent set of individuals. Most models also identify similar stages to progress through within a linear fashion (e.g., Plummer 1975; Minton and McDonald 1983). As Coleman (1981) notes, some are based upon developmental concepts as suggested by Erikson (1956) and Sullivan (1953). In other words, each phase of development must be concluded before the next stage can be encountered. However Eliason (1996a) substitutes the term "stage" for "phase", to emphasise that certain phases need not follow a linear pattern or even be completed.

Minton and McDonald (1983) argue that the three stages of lesbian and gay identity development are consistent with the theories of Habermas (1979), particularly, the theory of ego development. This is where identity formation will be contingent upon the development of an individual's ego functions, which include cognitive, linguistic, affective, motivational and social interaction processes. This involves a mutual exchange between the individual and the values and conventions of society. Integrated identities are assumed through a critical evaluation of mainstream society.

The model developed by Cass (1979) is based upon interpersonal congruency theory, which sees consistency and change in human behaviour as contingent upon the congruency or incongruency that prevail within an individual's interpersonal context. Perceptions of behaviour by the self and others are the key to retention of behavioural patterns. Rust (1993) and Eliason (1996b) are social constructionist, emphasising the role of existing social and political discourses. For Eliason (1996b), a lesbian identity is formed through communication with dominant and counter discourses. As Hunter et al. (1998) assert, social constructionist models emphasise that the meanings associated with a sexual identity can change according to context and history. Rust (1993) emphasises the historical construction of social and political categories and their effects on a lesbian and gay identity.

It would also appear that there has been less research on lesbian and gay identity formation during the 1990s. I think this reflects a trend in research as the debate moves forward. During the seventies and eighties, identity formation models focused more on the acquisition of a lesbian or gay identity with less emphasis on the development of sexual orientation and the performance of identities. The present emphasis tends to be on the political and performative aspects of identities, for example, Butler (1990) and Weeks (1998). Rust (1996) considers that we now look at the political meanings associated with sexual identities.

The First Acknowledgement That One Might be Lesbian or Gay

Most identity formation models begin with the process of the individual discovering that he or she is sexually attracted to members of the same sex. This takes place within a world where the majority of people are seemingly heterosexual. Individuals must deal with the possibility that they may be lesbian or gay, both on an individual level and against the backdrop of a society that holds largely negative opinions concerning lesbians and gays (Beard and Glickauf-Hughes 1994; Allen and Demo 1995; Green 1996). Prior to coming out, many lesbians and gays concede that they do not feel comfortable in identifying with the conventions of heterosexual society and feel different (e.g., Crites 1979; Martin 1982; Sullivan and Schneider 1987). Hence, they lack the ability to establish a satisfactory sense of identity and community.

Lewis (1984) and Martin and Hetrick (1988) assert that many lesbians have only blurred and uncertain feelings of being different, since society and its process of socialisation do not possess a positive vocabulary to define feelings for members of the same-sex. It is a personal realisation that there may be something that is radically different from other people. McCarn and Fassinger (1996), when discussing individual sexual identity development, refer to "Awareness" whereby a lesbian becomes aware of lesbian feelings. This creates a discrepancy between same-sex feelings and the way she previously saw her future life course, as that of a heterosexual. This leads her to question whether all people are heterosexual. Nevertheless, the awareness stage does not imply that she will label herself a lesbian. In a process that Lewis (1984) refers to as "Dissonance", a woman links her sense of difference to same-sex attraction; she also begins to find words to help her express her inner struggle. She is confronted with a conflict between the socialisation process which teaches her that she will one day get married and have children and her need for intimacy and identification with other women. To palliate

the dissonance process, Lewis argues, the lesbian woman may begin "bargaining" with herself, denying her feelings for other women.

Like Lewis, Eliason (1996b) refers to a "Pre-Identity stage". This is the period before a lesbian is aware of a category or identity to describe her same-sex feelings. This is due to the dominant discourses that privilege heterosexuality and obscures a positive lesbian category. This takes the form of, for example, stereotypes, which obscure people who are different from the white, heterosexual, middle class mainstream. Religion views all non-reproductive sex as unnatural (Ponse 1978). During the pre-identity stage, a lesbian begins to understand her oppression but she cannot find an existing category to label that oppression. Jenness (1992) also argues that if a woman is unaware of the category "lesbian", she will be unable to evaluate her experiences in terms of that category. This is similar to the position of Dank (1971) and Lewis (1984).

Plummer (1975), like Lewis (1984) and Eliason (1996b) also consider feelings of difference. Plummer refers to the "Sensitisation" stage. This begins with the first conscious moment of considering that one might be lesbian or gay. This could be triggered off by a sense of gender confusion, not feeling as if one is a man, or developing a strong emotional attachment to a member of the same sex. They are all sources for subsequent sexual interpretation according to Plummer. The origins for construing the self as lesbian or gay are so varied that even labelling by other people may constitute a source for believing that this is the case. These sources may occur at many points in a person's life. As the sensitisation is enhanced, the process augments and can become signified.

Cass (1979) expands on feelings of difference. According to Cass, these feelings of difference throw into disorder the heterosexual identity and engender confusion. The confusion could be rectified through refuting the possibility of being lesbian or gay. This could terminate any further exploration of identity. "Identity Comparison" can determine this, whereby the individual examines feedback from others and compares it to his or her own feelings. Wishik (1995) states that gay individuals may begin to ask themselves whether they are "evil" or "sinful". Wishik also claims that admitting to same-sex attraction is analogous to admitting to alcoholism or drug use. Cass believes feelings of difference leads to "Identity Confusion". It starts with a cognisance that same-sex attraction is applicable to an individual's thoughts and

behaviour. Social information on lesbians and gays must also be personalised and perceived as applicable. Absorption and personalisation of meanings and information concerning lesbians and gays will lead to confusion and the heterosexual identity will come to be questioned. Chapman and Brannock (1987), after interviewing one hundred and ninety seven women, argue that to feel sexually attracted to another woman did not mean that a woman would apply the lesbian label to herself. But due to the "Incongruence" stage (Cass 1979) a woman recognises that she is different from other women and begins to feel isolated. She also becomes more aware of her lack of sexual desire for other men. It is generally agreed that denial of such feelings can lead to a lowered self-esteem.

Minton and McDonald (1983) argue that an individual's initial recognition that he or she may be a gay or lesbian is brought on by childhood feelings of same-sex attraction. This is akin to the symbiotic and egocentric stages of ego development as laid down by Habermas (1979). During the symbiotic stage, a child has no sense of a bodily self and only knows the self from the natural environment. Recognition of the natural allows for a partial sense of self. But during the egocentric stage, the child is able to differentiate him or herself from the natural environment. This is based upon the ability to realise that they can produce social effects on the environment. A partial sense of individuality is recognised. Plummer's "sensitisation" stage can illuminate this. Plummer (1975) refers to a spill over effect, whereby a series of meanings, with no particular sexual meaning to an individual may be linked to other meanings, where the sexual content is more precise. These meanings and objects may be consolidated as clearer meanings occur. The individual can develop a stronger sense of self.

Exploring and Developing the Lesbian and Gay Identity

Lesbian and gay identity formation models also deal with the process of exploring and developing these feelings into an identity, which could be amalgamated into a lifestyle and become an accepted part of the self. This process is founded upon the necessity of actually accepting these feelings for members of the same sex. The individual must come out to himself or herself and this culminates in the individual disclosing the identity to significant others. Minton and McDonald (1983) refer to the "Sociocentric" stage, a strong and emerging awareness of difference and an awareness of society's attitudes towards lesbians and gays. This can engender guilt, shame and fear. The sociocentric stage is, again, founded upon the theories

of Habermas (1979). Individuals begin to separate the self from the natural environment. Whereas the identity was previously based upon the capacity of the body, social norms are now internalised and identity emerges as based upon role performance. Hence, the development and exploration of the identity is assumed within the light of societal and personal attitudes.

Plummer (1975) refers to the "Signification" and "Disorientation" stage. These involve feelings of being unlike other people, engendering perplexity and anxiety, leading to an internal inquiry. This also involved becoming more cognisant of societal attitudes towards lesbians and gays. Signification and disorientation may result, not only as a consequence of personality but to structural processes, too. Positive and negative reactions can generate problems and various consequential significations of the lesbian and gay experience. Negativity can engender, for example, guilt or denial. The more negativity that is encountered, the more it is taken on board. This may lead to secrecy that again leads to signification. When negativity and isolation become too apparent, then disorientation can be enhanced. This can be resolved through acceptance of, and by assuming, the lesbian or gay identity. Matza (1969) calls the signification stage the process of becoming "deviant" and of accepting this "deviant" identity.

Cass (1979) argues that identity confusion can be resolved through a perception that same-sex attraction is a genuine reality and desirable or it can also be perceived as a reality that is undesirable. In this case, individuals deny any association with same-sex sexual behaviour. An individual would completely reject any further attempts at identity formation. Same-sex sexual behaviour can be dismissed, even if one continues to partake in it, by separating it from identity. In other words, the individual believes that his or her sexual behaviour could not possibly constitute lesbian and gay sexual behaviour, if he, or she, is not a self-identified gay man or lesbian (Hencken 1984). Troiden (1979; 1988a; 1988b) refers to this as "Dissociation", a separation between identity and behaviour; nevertheless, he argues that dissociation can actually have the ironic effect of signifying these sexual feelings for members of the same sex. Denying it means that it is merely re-presented to them again through dissociation. Troiden and Goode (1980) found that one way of refuting that identity was to become involved in heterosexual activity which could temporarily avoid transforming sexual feelings for members of the same sex into an identity. Heterosexual activity and behaviour can then suppress any indications of same-sex attraction that an individual may feel.

Cass (1979) believes that once the individual had accepted his or her identity, incongruency between the perceptions of the individual and the perceptions of others could lead to alienation. Dismissing the perceptions of the mainstream society or "passing as straight" could surmount this incongruency. However, one can still continue to learn the management of a stigmatised identity and conform to social expectations. An element of congruency is introduced (Cass 1979; Wishik 1995). The lesbian or gay individual may feel more of a need to closet herself or himself, to pass as straight, in order to gain social and cultural approval; however, this closet soon begins to isolate the individual from both society, family and friends. Conversely, incongruency may lead to a desire to go out and explore the lesbian and gay communities or make connections with other lesbian or gay people. In what is termed "Identity Tolerance", the individual assumes the label of either lesbian or gay and begins to apply it to different areas of life. Contact with other lesbians and gays is particularly important in consolidating the assumption of the label, "lesbian" or "gay".

Nevertheless, the identity is still maintained as a secret from the heterosexual world. The person persists in leading a double life. Positive contact with lesbians and gays and the lesbian and gay communities will entail that the individual will speedily progress to acceptance of the self-identity, "Identity Acceptance". The lesbian or gay identity comes to be accepted, rather than tolerated. Incongruency can now be avoided through making fewer contacts with heterosexuals who may still be resentful. Disclosure to others, for example, friends and family, begins on a selective basis.

Eliason (1996b) refers to "Emerging Identities" whereby a lesbian develops abstract reasoning skills which helps her to understand the dominant discourses. Initial stereotypes provide a springboard for understanding whether she fits the category and for seeing their potential oppressive role. Initial stereotypes are the basis for the exploration and development of a lesbian identity. People who have never felt different will assume stereotypes automatically without question or the need to explore them in a deeper sense. Heterosexuals cannot usually specify when they discovered their heterosexuality. They assume that all "normal" people are heterosexual.

"Experiences and Recognition of Oppression" is where exploration of an oppressed identity entails that the identity becomes more central to a lesbian. Eliason (1996b) explains that

a number of different forms of oppression can be recognised. Among these oppressions are economic discrimination such as denial of access to employment; violence, intimidation and social exclusion. However, if there is no recognition or experience of oppression, the identity may not attain significant importance. This would explain why so few heterosexuals develop a central sexual identity and why women are more likely to be more aware of gender oppression than are men. Eliason (1996b) suggests that multiple experiences of oppression can lead to the emergence of multiple identities that cannot be separated. Lesbians of colour may experience prejudice directed at both their ethnic origins and their lesbianism. Experiences of dealing with oppression can empower a lesbian, which may give her a sense of pride in her identity. Recognition of oppression can be a catalyst for political action. McCarn and Fassinger (1996) advocate that during exploration and development, a lesbian will begin to examine sexual feelings for other women and the assumption that everyone else is heterosexual. Nevertheless, this does not mean that she will explore sexual behaviours or sexual partners.

All lesbian and gay identity formation models accentuate that the process of exploring and developing an identity entails the learning and development of different and new skills, for example, the development of interpersonal skills in order to be able to, for instance, meet and socialise with other people. As Coleman (1981) asserts, having been socialised as heterosexual, those who embark upon a lesbian or gay identity may lack the requisite skills to develop same-sex relationships. Skills are required to manage the assuming identity and this was contingent upon degree of social stigma and the type of attainable information (Troiden 1979; Schneider 1989). Some of the ways in which people manage their identities are by passing as heterosexual, acting out lesbian and gay stereotypes and deeming lesbian and gay culture to be superior to that of heterosexuals. This is similar to the work of Cass (1979), that contends that lesbian and gay individuals may dichotomise the environment into inferior heterosexuals and superior lesbians and gays. Obviously, such a strategy is a means of refuting heterosexual negativity. It increases a sense of the lesbian and gay collectivity. It can also entail that the private identity becomes more congruent with the public identity as one begins to find more confidence in rejecting heterosexual institutions and conventions. Cass (1979) calls this "Identity Pride".

Commitment to the Lesbian and Gay Identity

Finally, lesbian and gay identity formation models identify the process of making a commitment to a lesbian or gay identity. It is accepted as part of the self, which is consistently modified through social interaction (Moses 1978; Gramick 1984). Wishik (1995) refers to this as bargaining with the outside world. Lewis (1984) believes that this commitment to a lesbian or gay identity entails settling down in a way that is analogous to completing adolescence. The hurt and anger of discrimination is now blamed on society, rather than the individual. This suggests that, as most identity formation models do, commitment is an extremely important aspect in developing a new and healthy self-esteem. Public and private identities are merged into one. This could mean that such a strategy becomes a constant part of life as it is modified and negotiated throughout the life cycle. Minton and McDonald (1983) call this the "universalistic" stage, whereby the individual realises that the negativity associated with being lesbian or gay can be critically analysed.

> If the universalistic stage is successfully achieved, the individual will be able to separate particular norms from general principles upon which all norms are based" (Minton and McDonald 1983:99).

The identity of the individual alters from role identity to ego identity. The identity is consolidated and becomes consistent with lesbian or gay desire. Then the identity can stand up to all other contradictory expectations. Coming out becomes a significant aspect of identity formation models. This is when one discloses a lesbian or gay identity to significant others. Plummer (1975) refers to "Coming Out", whereby the individual can resolve the problems of disorientation and signification and identify as lesbian or gay. Coming out involves disclosing the lesbian or gay identity to significant others, for instance, friends and members of the family. A lesbian or gay career is embarked upon and these problems are dealt with through interaction with other self-defined lesbians or gays, neutralising guilt and lack of access to other lesbians or gays. Coming out then leads to a process of stabilisation, the assumption of a permanent lesbian or gay role. For Troiden (1979), meaningful homophile experience, meeting with other lesbian or gay people, is the most likely variable to precipitate coming out. A steady lesbian or gay identity is seen as preferable to sexual ambiguity. Weston (1991) sees pre-coming out as a division between an authentic self and a surface presentation directed towards an external world.

The individual comes out to himself or herself but hides that part from the world outside. Coming out ends this division. To come out to oneself entails making peace with the internal self, but that peace is never properly accomplished until the inner self is allowed to open up into the external world (Weston 1991).

According to de Monteflores and Schultz (1978) coming out entails reworking all past experiences. The individual works upon a more affirmative and appropriate sense of history and identity. The past, characterised by denial and negation, is disowned. All the previously denied traits and relations of the lesbian and gay identity are now accentuated and the individual must assimilate them back into his or her life; de Monteflores and Schultz refer to self-labelling as an integrating and as an instrumental function. The new label assimilates experience by combining events and aspects of the self that had previously been perceived as disparate. They use the example of a woman who labels herself as a lesbian and is able to acknowledge properly for the first time that most of her emotional requirements will be best satisfied by another woman. The satisfaction of these requirements are then realised as central and is followed by congruous instrumental behaviour, for example, looking for opportunities to be with other women.

Cass (1979) calls this "Identity Synthesis". A congruence is attained between the feelings experienced by the individual and the new identity. The identity becomes a part of the self. Awareness of this entails that the identity formation process has been accomplished. Identity formation models stress a congruence of feeling and identity. The congruence starts up a commitment, which develops as an obligation to live a lesbian or gay way of life. There must be comfort with the identity expressed by, for example, commitment to a lesbian or gay relationship.

McCarn and Fassinger (1996) argue that exploration deepens a lesbian's knowledge of herself. This leads to clarification of some choices concerning sexuality. Some women may see relationships with other women as only one possibility and may choose to identify as bisexual. A woman who recognises that she is primarily attracted to other women will seek commitment to self-fulfilment as a sexual being. Intimacy and identity become entangled as the woman realises that certain forms of intimacy imply certain things concerning her identity. She then moves to a full examination of these aspects of herself. Difficult decisions over emotions and sexual practices are resolved in the "Internalisation and Synthesis stage". McCarn and Fassinger

argue that a lesbian will need to examine and transform the internal concept of herself. This will also lead her to examine her public identity. She will have to make choices as to whether to disclose her lesbian identity to the public.

Eliason (1996b) believes that as lesbians gather personal experiences and gain in knowledge of lesbianism, the sense of self-identity may change to reflect this. These changes may be gradual or dramatic. Social and political events may influence these changes. The dominant discourses, which produce the stereotypes, continue to serve as the basis of identity development. They also continue to influence the access a lesbian has to counter discourses. Access to counter discourses continue to be the most empowering factor in developing positive lesbian identities. This is similar to the concept of detypification (Jenness 1992), whereby the individual attains an alternative interpretative schema. This permits one to redefine existing social constructs to give them deeper and more positive meaning and representation. However, as Richardson (1981) notes, even if the individual rejects negative stereotypes, he or she still has to reckon with the fact that such constructs still exist in mainstream society. Having looked at lesbian and gay identity formation models, I shall now proceed to consider some of the criticisms and reconceptualisations of them.

CRITICISMS AND RECONCEPTUALISATIONS OF LESBIAN AND GAY IDENTITY FORMATION MODELS

Lesbian and gay identity formation models appear to offer many insights into how lesbians and gays develop their identities. They provide important insights into the processes of developing positive lesbian or gay identities. However, they do set limits on viewing the development of lesbian and gay identities. Other aspects of identity, for example, ethnicity, gender and class tends to be negated. Many appear to be linear, focusing on individual progression through separate developmental stages. The influence of the wider society and the lesbian and gay communities on individual identity formation needs to be expanded too.

Ethnicity, Gender and Class

Ethnicity and gender are ignored, as are the ways and means by which these intersect and interconnect with sexuality. Gonsiorek (1995) argues that if variables such as ethnicity are

included, then identity formation models will shift qualitatively. They would address how different social groups construct variable concepts of family, ethnicity and sexuality. Hunter et al. (1998) point out that gender socialisation can have more of an impact on women's sexual identity formation than it can for men. Generic coming out models are less likely to apply to women. For example, Gonsiorek (1995) argues that the identity process for lesbians is likely to be more fluid and ambiguous as opposed to men. Similarly, Troiden (1989) found that women became aware of same-sex sexual attraction later than gay men did. Women were also more likely to disclose later than men were. Women may delay identifying as lesbian since affectional expressions between women are not unusual. However, men may interpret same-sex affectional expressions as clear confirmation of a gay identity. Wishik (1996) argues that sexual identities must be explained with reference to gender, culture and the significant others in an individual's life. Sexual identities are formed through a complex interaction of these variables. A bisexual male may be attracted to a gender ambiguous female. This may appear to be a hetero-erotic attraction in terms of biological sex. But his attraction to the gender ambiguous female may also constitute a desire to incorporate that gender ambiguity into his own bisexual identity. This helps him to relate more to his own bisexual and gay identity, an identity that is obscured by the heterosexuality implied by his attraction to a biological woman. This is also the dominant culture's interpretation of that attraction.

On ethnicity, Icard (1986) explains that the hostility between the black community and the gay community sunders black people's identities. This works to the disadvantage of black gay men. For many black gay men, the gay community symbolises the wider white society; the gender expectations of the black community further compounds the development of a black gay identity. For example, black culture emphasises the necessity of propagating the "race". The gay community may also perceive black people as inferior, limiting the support a black gay man can attain from the gay community. Ridge et al. (1997) argue that many Southeast Asian men feel marginalised within gay communities. Assimilation into the commercial scene means becoming disconnected from other ethnic social networks. The gay community itself does not allow for the expression of multicultural identities. The concept of a gay community is built around the exclusion of other ethnic identities. Espin (1997) notes that immigration may affect coming out. If a woman is a lesbian prior to migration, she must adapt and learn how to be a lesbian within her new cultural milieu. Similarly, Sinfield (1998) argues that "metropolitan gay" identities, which operate around the cultural and commercial scenes of large European and North

American cities tend to exclude certain individuals, particularly people of colour. Black and Asians are likely to find exclusion in their families because of their sexuality and exclusion in the lesbian and gay communities due to their ethnic identities.

Chan (1995) argues that most identity formation models are formulated from a western perspective and do not account for cultural diversity. Chan (1989) also found that non-white lesbians and gays want to be validated for both their ethnic identities and sexual identities. Chinese-American lesbians and gays lack the semantic categories available to western individuals to define themselves. The fact that Chinese-Americans accentuate the public identity over the individual identity also marks them off from western lesbians and gays. Group identity is so ubiquitous that individual identity may be diluted. Chinese-Americans are more likely to have to develop western definitions of sexuality in order to formulate a lesbian or gay identity. Chan (1995) argues that future research on identity development must consider divergent sexual definitions, integration of mainstream values, the economic influences on sexual identity, and the oppression of ethnic groups. As Herdt (1989) points out, stage models must be tested cross-culturally, to understand how identity formation is not only a process, but also the outcome of specific cultural products.

As well as gender and ethnicity, Bravmann (1996) points out the need to consider class as an issue relevant to lesbians and gays. Coming out for some working class individuals may be experienced as a process of re-identification, which is structured by middle class values and discourses. Eliason (1996b) also argues that most research on lesbians and gays has been on middle class and well-educated people.

Linearity

Eliason (1996a) and Hunter et al. (1998) point out that identity formation models tend to assume that individuals progress through linear stages that are well delineated. The researcher normally generated identity formation stages after re-examining the original data (Eliason 1996b). Individuals may have been conscripted into stages rather than the stages being produced to correspond to reality. Coleman (1981) argues we ought not assume that the models correspond to reality. Predictable patterns and sequences do not allow for the fact that different life cycle changes can also alter developments within identities. Faderman (1984) emphasises

"choice" as opposed to sequences and patterns. She argues that many heterosexual women came to lesbianism as a result of involvement in the radical feminist movement. Their lesbianism was freely chosen as a political strategy. They would not have experienced some of the sequences that appear in lesbian and gay identity formation models.

Rust (1993) points out that individuals continue to doubt and alter identity, even after adopting their present identity. Individuals are affected by periods of alternative identification and ambiguity concerning an identity. Similarly, Gergen (1991) argues for a postmodern process of "social saturation" whereby individuals are saturated with different identities and relationships. Exposure to these relations and identities means that we have to learn new ways of interacting with them. Dank (1971) also asserts that individuals may not immediately apply the label of lesbian and gay to the self, even when they begin their commitment to a lesbian or gay lifestyle, for example, attending lesbian or gay bars. They may continue to differentiate themselves from other lesbians and gays over a period of time. McDonald (1982) points out that whilst the process of recognising feelings of same-sex attraction to labelling the self as lesbian or gay may occur within an orderly sequence, variations within this sequence should be recognised. For example, in his sample of gay men, the time between recognising attraction to other men and labelling oneself as gay elapsed differently between the men. Ponse (1978) refers to this as identity lag. As Craib (1998) asserts, experience of identity is a dynamic process of interaction between how we feel about ourselves, and external stimuli such as labels and social identities. Internal feelings about ourselves can encourage us to explore how society defines us and views how we feel and experience emotions. Elliott (1985) argues that not every woman who enjoys lesbian sexual activity feels the need to establish a lesbian identity.

Troiden (1979) argues that to pass through each stage within a model should be viewed as making the acquisition of a gay identity more probable. It does not entail that each stage determines the other. Brown (1995) also argues against the assumption that there must follow a sexual identity development which has an outcome. It is as if women must be either "lesbian" or "heterosexual" throughout their lives, but not both at various points in the life cycle.

Blumstein and Schwartz (1974), Weinberg (1984), Sophie (1985), and Blumenfeld and Raymond (1988) argue that individuals do not always progress through given stages. The early stages of identity development may be linear, but Sophie (1985) found that many other

possibilities could prevail for lesbians. Women can revert back to attractions to men even though they have been developing lesbian identities. Some women decided that labels were too constraining and abandoned association with them. This could be compounded if the woman perceived sexuality to be of low significance and importance in her life. As Lewis (1984) points out, a woman, who has integrated a lesbian identity into her life may revert back to heterosexual relationships, should a long-term lesbian relationship be terminated. Moving from a supportive and reassuring urban environment to a less sympathetic rural area could also influence a woman to revert to previous heterosexual emotional stages. Blumstein and Schwartz (1974) argue that lesbian-identified women may come to realise that they have been capable of having relationships with men in the past. Some lesbians may also choose a man to "test" the extent of their lesbian identity. Weinberg (1984) argues that the stages presented by Minton and McDonald (1983) can be reified to the point that individual development comes to be seen akin to a biological development. Such an analysis ignores alternative pathways to developing sexual identities. As Weinberg (1984:83) suggests,

> A better approach would be to develop an organisational scheme based on elements common to all approaches to the study of lesbian and gay identity formation, without necessarily ordering them as a developmental sequence, each stage of which requires the individual to pass through the preceding stage.

Eliason (1996b) believes that an alternative to sequenced patterns would be to emphasise that phases, rather than stages, are never linear and may never be completed. Rust (1993) argues that an alternative to sequenced stages is to see social identity as the result of the interpretation of personal experience with reference to existing social constructs. Identity is a reflection of the social and political elements of society. Identity formation is a process of describing oneself in terms of available social and political constructs.

> By describing oneself in terms provided by one's social context, one locates oneself within this social context and defines one's relations to other individuals, groups, and socio-political institutions in this context (Rust 1993: 68).

It is as Jenness (1992) suggests that identities come into being from the kinds of people it is possible to be in society. The commitment to a lesbian or gay identity is not possible where

the cognitive construct of a lesbian or gay man does not exist. Social contexts are consistently changing. For Rust (1993), rather than assuming that a person will reach a sequenced and permanent identity, we should consider that its emergence is the result of social, political and historical events. However, Rust accepts that most people experience sexual identity as stable. Alterations are viewed as "part of a goal oriented process of discovering and accepting this essential sexuality" (Rust 1993). Ettore (1980) also argues that lesbian identity is a complex social construction, but lesbians continue to experience their sexuality in an essentialist context due to oppression. Weeks (1991) argues that identity formation is a paradox. Individuals constantly attempt to fix identities, but changes in language and culture can alter them. Butler (1990) argues against linearity in favour of exploring how identities are continually performed. Similarly, Queer theorists seek to view identity formation as non-linear and emphasise the continuous production of sexual identities. Bravmann (1996) views sexual identities as non-linear and historically constructed. Queer historical desires work to construct ideas of the self, communities and politics. Because lesbian and gay identities are socially constructed, they intersect with complex variables, such as the race and gender aspects, discussed in the previous section. As a result, identities are decentred, culturally and personally variable and exist in social representations of sexualities. Identities are multiply determined and fluid. There are no linear or unitary categorisations of sexual identities.

Harry (1993) argues that it is also too static to argue for a set of sequenced stages that usually result in the coming out stage. Lesbian and gay identity formation models tend to refute the possibility of differing intentions and motivations for being out in adulthood. They fail to account for factors that inhibit the process of disclosure. Rather than suggesting a model, comprised of sequenced stages, culminating in disclosure, Harry (1993) believes that "being out" is related to such factors as income, occupation, friends and place of residence throughout adulthood. Those in higher income groups are less likely to be out. Primary and secondary school teachers are more likely to be closeted due to the sensitive nature of their work. Thirty years of age appeared to be the highest age for being out. Harry (1993) explains that gay men under 25 are less likely to be on the gay scene as a result of non-disclosure; those over thirty are more likely to experience gay "burnout", or have attained higher positions of responsibility that require more circumspection.

Coming out is more applicable to the period surrounding the transition to adulthood. This is where the individual moves away from the old ascribed childhood audiences of school, parents and peers to adulthood attained or self-chosen audiences, for example, work colleagues and neighbours. Whether one comes out within adult audiences relates to the amount of homophobia within them and the importance of these audiences. The concept of "being out" replaces "coming out", to account for late adulthood and different economic and structural constraints. As Harry (1993:38) states,

> Coming out has little to say to adults and life seems to end at about age twenty-five with the rest of the life-span left unanalysed and unexplained. Being out speaks to the situation of the adult homosexual.

Similarly, Hostetler and Herdt (1998) argue that research on identities needs to focus more on individual subjectivities and agency by exploring "sexual lifeways". These are cultural developmental pathways which individuals can follow throughout their lives, though they may be influenced by broader social and cultural systems. Sexual lifeways also examine how sexuality and gender are embedded within historical, social and symbolic systems which individuals negotiate with. For instance, globalisation has increased the number of sexual lifeways available to individuals. Rather than exploring linear stages, the focus turns to thoughts, needs, desires, fantasies, attractions, ontologies and understandings of the self. We consider that some people may be socialised into a particular behaviour and identity, whilst acknowledging human agency which constructs and negotiates with certain local and wider regimes of thought.

Personal and Social Identities

Fassinger and Miller (1996) and Cox and Gallois (1996) argue that stage models of lesbian and gay identity formation overstate the role of the wider society at the expense of the more particular aspects of the gay and lesbian group and community. Also, social, personal and collective group identities tend to be conflated. The differences between a whole host of identities are downplayed too.

Fassinger and Miller (1996) argue that identity formation models conflate two separate processes into one model. Personal (individual) and social (group membership) aspects of identity formation appear to be submerged into one inclusive development; rather, there are two separate developments. There is the individual identity development process that involves the realisation and acknowledgement of same-sex feelings on an individual level. There is also a group membership identity process that involves facing oppression and the acceptance that an individual is a member of a collective oppressed group. The implications of this confusion, argue Fassinger and Miller, are that individuals who are not politically active in, for example, lesbian and gay politics and the lesbian and gay communities, can be seen as not having completed the full identity formation process. It is not completed since they do not articulate it on a collective or political level. Hence, there is a need to look at the social dimension as well as the individual and psychological aspect of identity formation (DeCecco 1981; Sophie 1985). Harre (1983) and Jenkins (1996) also argue that identities are processes through an internal and external dialectic. Individuals construct personal identities, which are influenced through participation in other social groups.

McCarn and Fassinger (1996) have developed a model of group membership identity development in relations to lesbians. They advocate that as well as having to develop an individual lesbian identity, lesbians must address the meaning of what it is to be a lesbian in society. Individual sexual identity development is unlikely to reach a final phase until a group membership identity has been developed. "Awareness" is the realisation that different individuals comprise different sexual predilections. It is awareness that heterosexism exists which can cause anxiety and confusion. In the "Exploration" phase, lesbians explore their attitudes to other lesbians and the possibility of getting involved with them. The fear and bewilderment of existing heterosexism nevertheless tempers the excitement of achieving this. "Deepening and Commitment" is whereby involvement deepens and awareness of the lesbian community is heightened. This leads to the refutation of heterosexual society and a fuller involvement in the lesbian community. "Internalisation and Synthesis" is the final phase. The lesbian internalises her identity as part of an oppressed group, leading to greater comfort and security.

Group membership identity development is a separate process from individual identity development. In empirical research, Fassinger and Miller (1996) found that gay men identified

with the two separate developments. The model permits flexibility in the development of disclosures. It does not assume that he is only fully "out" as a gay man when he is participating within a collective scene. They also ascertain that individual identity development is a less complicated process than group membership identity development. This is because the latter development involves confronting a series of external developments, environmental support and expectations. Multiple oppressions may be investigated, and their influences on both identity developments can be examined. Plummer (1995) has also distinguished the individual route from the collectivist change. He suggests that the collective group is more likely to be important since it is the catalyst for much larger social and political change. Coming out personally is a conversation with the self about who we really are. Coming out politically is used as a basis for social change.

Cox and Gallois (1996) argue that stage models of lesbian and gay identity formation ignores the specific social group. Social identity theory demonstrates that self-categorisation entails the adoption of multiple values and characteristics of a specific group, referred to as "social identities". Lesbian and gay categorisation can be based upon sexual behaviour, companionship or emotional attachment. This is complemented by "personal identities", founded upon unique, individual aspects of the self. To develop positive self-esteem, individuals will compare themselves to other groups to see their social identity in a conducive light. Cox and Gallois give the example of lesbian and gay categorisation leading to a lesbian or gay person evaluating the lesbian or gay in-group in a positive light. There is then the possibility of developing high self-esteem and a positive personal and social identity.

Group identities can change in accordance with two different, but inter-linked strategies, "social creativity" and "social competition". Cox and Gallois (1996:20) argue, "The basis of low self-esteem for subordinate groups is the negative evaluations which result from comparisons with dominant group on the dimensions defined by the dominant group." Social creativity is the process whereby the subordinate group can try and alter these comparisons. New dimensions in which to compare groups can be initiated. The gay and lesbian group may embrace the dimension of "being artistic", viewing lesbians and gays as more artistic than heterosexuals are. The new dimension results in the lesbian and gay group being able to compare themselves more favourably to heterosexuals. Social creativity may not result in massive changes in the wider society, but enable the subordinate group to develop a more positive group identity. This could

possibly affect, for instance, personal identity. Social competition is the process whereby the subordinate group and the dominant group accept changed status in the mainstream society. As Cox and Gallois (1996:21) advocate,

> Direct competition with the dominant group is required. This involves direct social protests, campaigns against the law and direct confrontation with dominant groups.

The main advantage of theories that account for differing identities is that a whole host of spheres that can affect identity development are considered. The individual is seen as affected by a whole series of spheres. This is not the case with many of the previous identity formation models. They analyse and consider the development of a lesbian or gay identity as a "unitary" identity, which develops in isolation from the family (Eliason 1996a). They do not adequately consider the effects of the family upon a lesbian or gay identity. They rarely expand on the possibility that a "sexual" identity could co-exist with other identities, for example, a "familial" identity. Cox and Gallois argue that social identity theory is more concerned with process issues about identities, rather than the particular content, which is the case with stage theories (e.g., Plummer 1975; Cass 1979; Minton and McDonald 1983).

There is no essential end to identity development, but constant change. Interaction processes between individuals and groups are of more significance than individual stages. For example, Lemon and Patton (1997) argue that lesbian identity formation is constantly influenced by interaction with lesbian communities. How a lesbian experiences lesbian communities can lead her to question and reshape her view of her personal lesbian identity. Social identity theory is more adept in analysing power relations than the stages of identity formation models. Theories that consider social, group and personal identities move beyond mere categorisation and the unitary individual into processes, comparison, strategies and multiple identities. Cass (1984) alerts us to the probability that a homosexual identity can be distinguished from a lesbian or gay identity. A homosexual identity constitutes sexual orientation. A lesbian or gay identity constitutes affiliation with the lesbian and gay communities and the political beliefs and ideas which come with that affiliation. Nevertheless, social and group identity theories do have one thing in common with stage theories. Despite multiplicities and processes, it would appear that these are all seen within the context of a need

for an "essential" positive identity and self-esteem.

Gonsiorek (1995) argues that identity formation models are a significant theoretical development, describing "additional" developmental processes that are specific to lesbians and gays. They complement other developmental processes and issues that occur throughout the lesbian and gay lifespan. However, Gonsiorek contends that the earlier models may not be applicable beyond the time and context in which they are generated. These models also leave out psychological processes that may occur before the individual comes out, according to Gonsiorek. Brown (1995) alerts us to the fact that stage models of lesbian identity are akin to psychodynamic theories, in that they lack any explication of the roots of lesbian feelings and erotic desires. Nevertheless, the strength of stage models lays in their accentuation of malleability and flux.

To sum up, Suppe (1984) believes that concepts of sexual identities are best seen in a multidimensional way. This includes biological sex, gender identity, social sex role, behavioural and affectional dimensions of sexual orientation. Psycho-biologically mediated arousal and response patterns should also be included. Social constructionist theories on their own can usually only deal with issues of self-concept. But as Brown (1995:18) advocates, when reviewing stage models,

> They offer the scholar or researcher frames within which to raise questions about what might happen in lesbian identity development in a lesbian-defined, lesbian-affirmative social context rather than the heterosexist and anti-lesbian social discourse which informs the developmental process of almost every lesbian.

Now that identity models and the position of coming out within them has been considered, I will now turn to coming out to the family.

COMING OUT AND FAMILY REACTIONS

Coming Out, Discovery and Initial Reactions

Weston (1991) argues that coming out as lesbian or gay emphasises the sexual aspect of

families. This is important given that the family has rather more to do with kin than it does sexuality. Coming out to the family entails that an individual potentially comes to terms with all the negativity associated with stereotypes of lesbians and gays, rather than allowing the family to remain oblivious to the existence of a lesbian or gay person within its boundaries. Plasek and Allard (1984) refer to coming out to the family as an impingement into a family's life space. The life space contains all those family members who are likely to see the lesbian or gay individual as an extension of themselves. However, there appears to be very little research concerning relationships between lesbians and gays and their families of origin. The little amount of work that has been done has largely raised the issues of parents' initial reaction to disclosure. There is a limited analysis of the process beyond initial reaction (e.g., Savin-Williams 1989a; Savin-Williams 1990; Strommen 1990; Newman and Muzzonigro 1993 and Ben-Ari 1995; D'Augelli et al. 1998).

Disclosure to parents is far more complicated than disclosure to other individuals (Weinberg 1972; Cramer and Roach 1988). Individuals may desire not to hurt or disappoint others to whom they are closest. (Cramer and Roach 1988). Wirth (1978) describes coming out as a situation which will only "last a second", but whose ramifications can last far into the future. Cain (1991a) argues that gay men experience discord and ambivalence during the coming out process due to conflict between family and individual obligations. Lesbians and gays appear to be told that disclosure is preferable and requisite for self-acceptance and high self-esteem. Yet they are also aware that such a disclosure could result in confusion, disorder and emotional disturbances within the home. Lewis (1984) argues that a lesbian may need to actively hide a relationship with another woman due to anxiety over parental discovery. How parents perceive their children will also impact upon the child's perception of himself or herself. Cain argues, too, that anxiety and ambivalence is often compounded by the fact that relationships with parents are perceived as permanent, and cannot be replaced when lines of communication break down.

Lewis (1984) describes coming out to parents as a turning point. The decision to disclose can either be political, for instance, engendered by media attention on a lesbian or gay issue or a more personal issue can engender it. Cain (1991b) also identifies "Relationship-Building Disclosures", which are motivated by the desire to improve a relationship with another person. However, this type of disclosure is normally limited to close friends and families, who

are deemed to be the most sympathetic and understanding. Preventing emotional separation is the most important aspect here.

Borhek (1988) suggests that the chaos and uncertainty of adolescence further exacerbate ambivalence and anxiety. The individual begins to establish an autonomous identity that entails separation from the family. Coming to terms with a lesbian or gay identity compounds this process. There exists no lesbian or gay peer group for the adolescent to gain support from before disclosure to the family. As Collins and Zimmerman (1983) state, lesbian and gay adolescents confront the same developmental tasks as heterosexual adolescents. But mainstream society makes it difficult for lesbians and gays to experiment with adult roles, "normal" social behaviour, and affectional family relationships. Heterosexual adolescents can employ these relationship patterns in order to arrive at adulthood with competence and self-reliance. If the family is constrictive, then the lesbian or gay adolescent might have to defer this adolescent process.

Borhek (1988) also remarks that both parents and lesbian and gay children may initially react to the disclosure of a lesbian or gay identity within the family by blaming it for a whole host of other familial complications. Individual family dynamics will also affect initial reactions. For example, other family members may press the gay or lesbian individual not to disclose to specific other family members (Rothberg and Weinstein 1996). The scope for individual freedom in the process of disclosure is limited. Strommen (1990) also expands upon family dynamics. When families discover lesbian or gay children, they only have a social stigma model to understand them. Family members must find a way to understand the new lesbian or gay member. If the family schema is anti-lesbian and gay, this understanding will be negative. The lesbian or gay family member's previous role as, for example, brother or son, will be negated as the family aims to redefine the individual's identity. This disturbance in role interpretation is experienced by the rest of the family as an abrupt alienation from the individual. The previous identity is deemed to have been forfeit and the individual becomes a stranger to the family. Devine (1984) argues that initial negative reactions are influenced by three family themes. The first is to up respectability at all costs. Here, the family will conform to the largely stigmatising norms of society. Secondly, families can view the "problem" as something which can only be solved by them with no external assistance. Thirdly, families can manage the new identity by conforming to what they believe their religion informs them. The

child could then be rejected in good conscience.

Ben-Ari (1995) identifies three stages in the process of coming out to the family, "pre-discovery experiences", "the actual act of discovery" and "post-discovery experiences". Pre-discovery experiences encompass fears of coming out and involved the motives for coming out. The parents' background and the ways they felt and thought about lesbians and gays were the two most important components in children's experiences prior to discovery. Muller (1987) argues, too, that what they either do or do not know about lesbians or gays taints parental reactions.

The discovery stage, according to Ben-Ari (1995), is where the parents come to know of their child's lesbian or gay identity, through face to face contact or by letter or telephone. Muller (1987) argues that parents possess individual strategies for dealing with stressful situations throughout the discovery stage. As Muller (1987:35) also states, "Those strategies can vary from unconsciously rigid distortions of the truth to consciously adaptive ways of coping with reality." Hostility, shock, anger, guilt, denial, blame and confusion appear to constitute likely initial reactions (Wirth 1978; Collins and Zimmerman 1983; Anderson 1987; Muller 1987; Blumenfeld and Raymond 1988; Bernstein 1990; Saltzburg 1996). These are emotions and reactions that are generally associated with the grief process (Anderson 1987; Savin-Williams 1998). Parents may experience discovery as a loss of their child. Gibson (1998) when discussing loss and trauma in general, asserts that shock and disbelief are likely to be the first reactions of those who face bereavement over the loss of someone close to them. Hostility can result in the rejection of a child and is the most extreme reaction. However, Muller found that most of the parents she studied did not react with extreme anger; rather they react in various ways, expressing shock, guilt and denial. This can be attained through "blocking it out", viewing the lesbian or gay identity as just a phase, or by avoiding the subject altogether. Parents' denial, argues Muller, can also be seen as a conditional love. But it can also result in a parent's isolation, not only from the child's lesbian or gay world, but from the world of other parents of lesbian and gay children. Wirth (1978) views denial as a defence that externalises the issue. Griffin et al. (1986) view denial as the ostrich effect of taking cover. Inner feelings are denied expression. It is a means of control, of flattening out inner ambiguity. Even where parents suspected their child's lesbian or gay identity, these suspicions did not temper the reactions of shock, guilt and denial. Collins and Zimmerman (1983) and Bernstein (1990) contend that from

conception, parents develop an image of their children and the future identities of these children. As Bernstein (1990) points out, parents can never adequately prepare for discovery of a lesbian or gay child. It is never realised as a possibility. The development of parental identities is linked to the future progression of the children's identities. Married children are often expected to produce grandchildren for their parents. Families must then re-form myths and restructure meanings by absorbing unpopular information. If the family comes to see the identity of the lesbian or gay individual as "bad", then the individual may react by internalising the "good" lesbian or gay; hence this sunders the individual and familial identity on a larger scale.

Guilt may also confront parents (Weinberg 1972; Jones 1978; Fairchild and Hayward 1979; Griffin et al. 1986; Muller 1987; Martin and Hetrick 1988; Robinson et al. 1989; Strommen 1989). Doubting parental effectiveness may be one expression of this on the parents' part. Parental self-esteem may also be lowered as they realise that they might not have been the "perfect" parents (Bernstein 1990; Henderson 1998). As Wirth (1978) points out, fearful fantasies come to the forefront, which are often distorted and employed as scare tactics in order to get the lesbian or gay individual to retract. Eventually, however, guilt, plays itself out and leads to a process of acknowledgement and clarification of misunderstood issues. True acceptance rarely actually transpires. Where it does, this entails a celebration of a lesbian or gay individual's integrity. Nevertheless, doubts and anxieties persist and never completely depart the family. Muller argues that parents also possess the potential to receive the coming out message in a loving fashion. They react out of a concern for their children and reaffirm their love through this "love" reaction.

Bernstein (1990) contends that parents are initially faced with question of what "caused" it and whether the child is likely to change. Parents hope that it is merely a stage and hope that their off-spring will one day realise that heterosexual relationships are more genuine. Parents also tended to connect the conventional heterosexual lifestyle, for example, marriage and children, exclusively with happiness. Lesbian and gay lifestyles were connected to unstable relations and lack of children. They therefore expected their off-spring to end up lonely and unhappy, alienated from a heterosexual lifestyle.

The Process Beyond Initial Reactions

The process beyond initial reactions is a period of coming to terms with changing concepts, different life histories, and alterations in relationships. It is a period of retrospection and changing definitions based on gender, religion, family size and the relations which family members previously had with each other (Jones 1978; Griffin et al. 1986; Wirth 1978; Anderson 1987; Muller 1987; Borhek 1988; Savin-Williams 1989; Kadushin 1996; Saltzburg 1996). Muller (1987) argues that the post discovery period is where families attempt to rebuild their relationships. If families remain connected, new developments in relationships occur. From her own research, Muller (1987) believes that parents do not change substantially, but, nevertheless, a second level response does ensue. Second level responses are also likely to be positive. Muller (1987:47) states, "Most parents do not seem to move through any lengthy, linear progression of stages that result in increased understanding and acceptance."

Muller identifies four different relationships that follow initial reactions. The "Loving Denial" relationship is where parents become accepting, but continue to closet the subject within the immediate family. Acceptance is normally limited to the child. Parents do not seek information about a same-sex partner or the lesbian and gay communities. Sexual orientation as an issue is closeted; and the child participates in this by monitoring the situation. The "Hostile Recognition" relationship is where parents remain belligerent. But this could also have been a characteristic of relationships prior to disclosure. Nevertheless, the issue of sexual orientation only serves to compound this and ends in long term separation.

The third, the "Resentful Denial" relationship, occurs when parents refuse to acknowledge their son's or daughter's gay or lesbian sexuality, but the individual remains associated with other family members. Bernstein (1990) argues that fear of social stigma towards the parents themselves as inadequate and the children as deviants are the main causes of non-acceptance. These relationships are subject to improvement as well as deterioration, and appear less static than the hostile recognition relationship. Lastly, there is the "Loving Open" relationship, the most positive. These relationships were loving before disclosure, and parents were more open and acknowledging of their child's lesbian or gay identity. They are the most satisfactory relationships, but are open, nevertheless, to deterioration in certain circumstances. However, it would appear that love dominates. Ben-Ari (1995) argues that during post-

discovery, relations between parents and their children are more likely to improve if parents came to believe that their son or daughter had disclosed in the interests of honesty.

Griffin et al. (1986) argue that such a move to acceptance involves renewing perceptions of the child, confronting parental prejudices, and becoming aware of the child's anguish. It can also involve letting go of the child so as to reduce guilt, and accept that the off-spring is responsible for his or her life, not the parents. Bernstein (1990) argues that love is the most important factor for parents in their relations with their off-spring. Hence, no matter what they think about lesbians and gays, they do their best to maintain a relationship. However, this positive outcome may be influenced by negative hopes. Some parents maintain a relationship in the hope that the child will come to his or her senses.

These relationships are subject to individual alterations, and differences can be experienced depending upon the sex of the child or the parent. Muller (1987) and Ben-Ari (1995) found that, on the whole, mothers and fathers are more likely to be less positive about their lesbian daughters. Muller attributes this methodologically to the fact that she studied fewer fathers than mothers, as a result of death, divorce and estrangement. Mothers of sons were the more positive of parents. Muller imputes this to the fact that, as the monitor of emotional ties within a family, mothers tend to avoid any discomforting relations between members of the family. Families are more accepting of gay sons, as they tend to come out earlier. This allows more time for a family to develop a sense of consistency about the new gay identity, even if this doesn't always progress to more positive relations. Secondly, males, despite being gay, continue to adhere to other male pursuits, such as competitive jobs, which remain part of a father's expectations for his son. Jones (1978) contends that mothers possess certain built-in emotional responses which develop with their sons, that might not develop with daughters. Mothers are spared competition with their sons in the same way that they may not be spared with their daughters.

Jones (1978) believes that the mother will usually be the first person to whom a son discloses. The warm relationship will entail that a son experiences considerable pain if he has to withhold information relating to his gay identity. A mother will also have to come to terms with her sense of identity, as she struggles to understand and incorporate a son's gay identity into her life. Mothers have to confront their own self-concepts, for example, the self-concept of wife,

woman or helpmate. She also has to confront where past and present identities belong within her life now that she is aware of her son's new gay identity.

According to Muller (1987) and Boxer et al. (1991), after coming out, daughters have less amicable relations, particularly with fathers. The disruption of traditional sex roles, the realisation that daughters will not be married in the future to men and will not have off-spring, engender feelings of fear and discomfort, particularly among fathers. Traditionally, there has been heavy responsibility on the father to ensure that his daughter can be married, so as to ensure her future financially (Weinberg 1972; Jones 1978). Furthermore, lesbians do not have the opportunity to live up to other traditional sex role activities in the same way as men do. According to Muller (1987), lesbian daughters gave their parents more reason to think that their sexual orientation was merely a phase, for example, by coming out during times of courtship with men and, after having their own children, having been in heterosexual relationships. This past involvement with heterosexual relations only served to facilitate parental desires that one day, daughters would return to their previous heterosexual lives.

Muller (1987) argues, too, that fathers are more likely to become more positive, if he has several other children, who are expected to marry and have off-spring. A double anathema can also be depicted should a lesbian daughter, for instance, exceed her father's own career and educational attainment. Lesbianism, argues Jones (1978), may raise emotional responses in fathers, connected to their own self-concepts of masculinity and manhood. Lesbianism can be threatening, in that the masculine ego is contested. Jones (1978) argues that it is complicated for men to accept relationships for women that do not involve men. Weinberg (1972) argues that such "sexism" complicates a lesbian's relationship with parents, much more than that of a son. Both secrecy and defiance are perceived as more acceptable in males than in females.

Weinberg (1972) has formulated a model to analyse whether the adjustment process is either positive or negative. Two parenting themes are of significance, a love theme and a conventionality theme. The love theme assumes that the parents will accept their children for what they are, regardless of social stigma. Love and loyalty transgress society. As Strommen (1990) argues, the family must articulate an understanding of the lesbian or gay member that dispenses with stigma. Secondly, a new identity is to be constructed which will incorporate aspects of the familial identity into it, too (Strommen 1990; Boxer et al. 1991). Factors affecting

this will be a broader knowledge of lesbians and gays and a trust in their own understanding of the child. The family may not approve of lesbians and gays, but acknowledge that their son or daughter is still the same person that he or she was before coming out (Anderson 1987).

However, if the conventionality theme dominates, societal views will assume prominence, and conformity will be demanded. The old role cannot be mourned and a new identity fails to be found. The individual is blamed for the role disruption and this indicates the lack of an efficacious mechanism for managing the crisis. Numerous barriers may be imposed upon the off-spring, for example, emotional neglect, through to expulsion from the home (Anderson 1987). The love and conventionality themes can also be seen in the work of McDonell et al. (1991). They argue that AIDS may put distance between the family member with AIDS and the rest of the family. However, knowledge of the member's lesbian or gay identity can put even more distance between the individual and the family (Boxer and Cohler 1989; Paradis 1991).

As I mentioned earlier, then, most of the literature focusing upon the social construction of a lesbian and gay identity has little to say about the further developments in reactions and relationships within the family. Demo and Allen (1996) argue that family structure is important, given that heterosexuals raise most gay and lesbian adults. The disclosure of a lesbian or gay identity is by no means the end of the process of identity formation. The two are mutually related and compatible. Weston (1991) argues that coming out brings the discourse of sexuality into the family. I think there is a need for a more substantial body of theory to deal with developments in familial reactions, identities and relationships. I will now set out what I propose to do for the present research.

A PROPOSAL FOR RESEARCH INTO LESBIANS AND GAYS AND THE FAMILY

The purpose of the present research is to observe, document and analyse the processes of negotiation and interaction involved in the social construction of lesbian, gay and parental identities through relationships within the family. It also seeks to understand how lesbians and gays experience aspects of the outside world, for example, work and the lesbian and gay communities as compared to experiences within their families. It will consider this from the perspectives of both lesbians and gay men and their parents. It aims to proceed beyond the

previous research in that it will explore the social construction of a lesbian or gay identity beyond the initial reactions of parents. By moving beyond the initial reactions, I want to document and analyse how further relationships and negotiation affects a lesbian or gay identity. I decided after reviewing the literature that the research could be divided into two different research themes, which are distinct, but related. The first is the "internal" theme. The second is the "external" theme. The processes of negotiations and interactions through familial relationships can be incorporated into the internal and external theme so as to be more specific. The internal theme will be examined in Chapter 3 and 4. The external theme will be examined in Chapter 5.

The Internal Theme

The internal theme to be analysed in Chapters 3 and 4 will be concerned with relationships within the family between lesbians and gays and their parents. I will briefly consider how lesbians and gays experienced their families before they disclosed their sexuality to their parents. I will document how lesbians and gays managed their identity before disclosure in order, for example, to see if this had any impact on how they disclosed their lesbian or gay identity to parents. I will look at the different ways of coming out to a parent and what coming out means to a lesbian or gay person.

I will then move on to document and analyse developments in attitudes and relationships from the time that a parent discovers that their daughter or son is lesbian or gay or from the time when their son or daughter discloses his or her sexual identity, to the present. I will examine how parents first felt and reacted to disclosure and analyse what influenced their first feelings and reactions. For example, would parents who hold traditional stereotypes concerning lesbians and gays react more negatively than parents who do not subscribe to such stereotypes would? I will then consider the effects of a given parental reaction on the lesbian daughter or gay son.

I aim to consider what issues disclosure might bring up between parents and their son or daughter. Both parents and their children may be faced with certain issues that they would not have had to confront had a son or daughter never revealed his or her sexuality. I want to discover whether these issues might be personal issues that affect relationships on a more

intimate and personal level, for example, fear of lack of grandchildren; or whether disclosure might bring up issues that might be more social and political. For example, a political event such as a national discussion concerning the age of consent for gay men could be more of an issue for parents, alerting them to certain concerns, than if such a discussion were not in the news. I also want to examine how parents might deal with or cope with the knowledge that their son or daughter is gay or lesbian. Do parents prefer to cope with disclosure by keeping it in the family or do they feel that it is better dealt with by consulting other people beyond the family? This will lead me to evaluate whether the issues which disclosure brings up affects the way a parent chooses to deal with or cope with the knowledge that their son or daughter is gay or lesbian.

I will examine whether and how parents change from their initial reactions to the present. This involves looking at what the main factors may be in influencing whether a parent changes towards a son or daughter. I will explore whether parents and their children keep in contact, and what the quality of that contact is like during that process of change and the coming to terms with disclosure. If it is the case that some parents do not change, I will want to explain why this is the case compared to those parents who did change. I will also want to consider degrees of change if this is the case, too. Changes in how parents and their children see each other throughout this process will also be addressed.

Lastly, the internal theme will examine the relationship between the sexual identity and the familial identity. I will consider the identity to which the lesbian or gay individual feels closest to, the sexual or the familial. I will examine whether being lesbian or gay makes an individual feel different from other family members and how important being a member of the family is. I will also explore whether the individual continues to adhere to family values and whether parental expectations continue to be important to both the parents and their children. These questions will help us to see how important different identities are to lesbians and gays and help one to see how these identities might conflict or be reconciled.

The External Theme

The external theme, to be covered in Chapter 5, will analyse and evaluate how lesbians and gays experience the lesbian and gay communities, and a whole host of other aspects of the outside

world. These experiences will then be compared to experiences within the family. By comparing them, I will be able to consider where a lesbian or gay person feels that she or he is most comfortable. For example, I might find that an individual feels most comfortable within the family since it is more familiar. I want to know how a lesbian or gay man experiences the outside world and the lesbian and gay communities to see if these experiences are different from experiences within the family.

The external theme will also consider whether the lesbian and gay communities, the rest of the outside world, and the family might overlap. For example, it might be that individuals take the different ways of managing their identity in, for instance, the outside world, into their families. Also, I want to know how possible movement between the family, the lesbian and gay communities and the outside world affects one. Fassinger and Miller (1996) argue that two important identities influence lesbian and gay individuals, a personal identity, and a public group identity, the experience that one is a member of an oppressed public and collective group, the lesbian and gay communities. My aim is to build on this by looking at what influence the family has on this. The external theme will also proceed to analyse how lesbian and gay involvement with the outside world affects how parents perceive their children's identities.

The research will proceed further than identity formation models in that it will consider the family and its influence upon a lesbian or gay identity at a deeper level. It appears that most of the identity formation models are largely theoretical and not necessarily empirical (Eliason 1996a). By using an empirical approach, I hope to obtain a broader understanding of the formation of lesbian and gay identities within the family from the respondents' experiences. The research will further develop previous literature on lesbians, gays and their families by expanding the previous research literature. It will explore further the process from disclosure to the present by addressing the above issues in more depth. Previous literature does not go beyond lesbian and gay experience in the family. The external theme will allow a comparison of experiences beyond the family and how these compare to experiences in the family. Now that I have addressed the specific scope of the research to be covered, I will now consider how my research relates to the theoretical framework.

THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

My research is predicated upon a broad theoretical framework, that of the construction and management of different identities and sexualities within families. It is also centred on more general debates concerning difference within families. Identities and relationships that may be assumed by groups or individuals are increasing in postmodernity and these identities are becoming more fluid and less stable. Emphasis is on difference. Individuals are no longer born lesbian or gay or essentially made lesbian or gay through a limited psychodynamic relationship within a homogenetic family. Rather, essential identities disintegrate and are constructed and negotiated. In the theoretical framework, I will outline some general sociological debates on families, identities and relationships in postmodernity. I will then relate these ideas to my own particular research.

Identities, Family Relationships and Family Diversity in Postmodernity

Lyotard (1984/1994) argues that a key feature of postmodernity is the decline of the legitimating power of metanarratives in the quest for knowledge. Metanarratives are grand totalising theories of, for example, social progress, which legitimates modern knowledge, cultures and social institutions. For instance, the grand theories of Marx and Parsons have lost their authority to explain and justify social relations in the world today. It is more likely that these theories are used as agents of social control. Social theory and social relations have become less stable, certain and predictable. This has lead to the rise of a postmodern science. Postmodern knowledge dispenses with universal and unitary categories. Instead, it argues for local and contextualised forms of knowledges and stories. There is an appreciation of social and cultural differences between individuals. Similarly, Foucault (1972/1994) argues against the uses of totalising theories in a postmodern world. Instead, knowledge should be autonomous and non-centralised. This is best achieved through the "insurrection of subjugated knowledge". These are discourses which have been hidden or disguised by the existing regime of thought. The knowledges of, for instance, the psychiatric patient and the disabled would be insurrected, as opposed to the existing grand theories of medicine. A "genealogy" emerges as a result, giving voice to a multiplicity of discourses. These discourses are not primarily opposed to the

concepts and methods of science. Nevertheless, they challenge the totalising powers which institutionalise organised scientific discourse, which negates local knowledges. Rorty (1980/1994) also argues against singular narratives and makes a case for competing discourses of explanation and description, which are not necessarily opposed to one another.

Linked to the decline of metanarratives is the postmodernist argument that the subject has been "decentred". Whereas metanarratives assume that the individual is ahistoric and uniform, postmodernists argue that the human mind and behaviour is variable and reflects local differences and contexts. No singular theory can capture how individuals construct and negotiate the social world. Lyotard (1984/1994) argues that there is no central principle to organise a society and that there is no unitary essence to individual identities. Foucault (1978) argues that an individual's sexuality is not a natural truth that can be uncovered by natural science. It is sexual discourses which create an individual's sexuality. The subject is created through local knowledges, discourses and identities. The decline of the unitary subject and story also leads to the postmodernist emphasis on diversity and difference. West (1994) argues for a new cultural politics of difference. This is the process whereby feminism, lesbian and gay studies and the New Left challenge the established eurocentric and male dominated discourses, which construct false claims to universality and the truth. The new cultural politics of difference emphasises the value of locality, difference and individuality.

It is on this basis that Stacey (1990) coins the term "postmodern families". This approach considers that kinship arrangements can be seen as diverse, different and contested. Bernardes (1997) argues that a postmodernist approach is critical of the functionalist "systems theory" approach to families, which perceives family relationships to be standardised and stable. Marxism perceives the family as reflecting the economy. The traditional family is standardised because of the needs of capital. Engels (1884/1972) argues that the monogamous couple occurred as a result of the male's need to keep and control a woman. This was because he could never be sure that any children she gave birth to were his. If he were certain, then he would be able to securely pass down his private property to the male heir. Davis (1948) and Parsons (1964; 1971) argued for a scientific and systematic analysis of the family based on universal definitions. The family is an organic system which functions by maintaining balance as it faces external pressures. Cheal (1991) points out that the family is perceived as an adaptive unit that mediates between the individual and society and protects the well being of its individuals. At

the same time, the family ensures the well being of society as a whole. Families are mainly seen as performing essential functions for both their members and society. For instance, reproduction, maintenance, social placement and socialisation are the most important functions of families. Parsons (1964) argued that the isolated nuclear family was the most effective family form conducive to a modern industrial economy. Men attended to the instrumental functions of, for example, economic provision. Women attended to expressive functions such as looking after the emotional needs of the family. The stabilisation of these roles for men and women fitted both their "biological" capacities and ensured the smooth functioning of society.

As a result, Cheal (1991; 1999) asserts that visions of standardisation and uniformity are linked to the concepts of progress and universality in modernity. Modernity perceived family and organisational life as converging to universal standards, transforming our lives in regular and predictable ways. For example, the progress of modernity lifts individuals out of poverty and ignorance. People free themselves from these limits by standardising social life through the power of reason and rationality. Parsons (1971) asserted that the urban middle class family would become the cultural standard for American life. Developments in the economy which increase the standard of living meant more people would adopt such living arrangements. Similarly, Kellner (1992) argues that in modernity, identity became self-reflexive in that new locations of identity formation occurred. Nevertheless, modernity encouraged a tendency to organise identities so that they remained fixed around a set of roles and norms. Increased identities occurred but individuals gained recognition by organising identities into stable recognised forms. As Cheal (1999: 57) asserts,

> The process of institutionalised transformation shapes and controls social life at the same time as it changes it, so that the result is an increased regularity of social behaviour.

Cheal (1999) proceeds to argue that these visions of progress and standardisation have been disrupted as we recognise the different and diverse ways of organising families. Rather, a postmodernist approach considers that we look into the heads of individuals and explore how they construct and define family life in all it's differences and potentials, rather than relying on forms of standardisation and regularity. We examine the life courses of individuals, how lives alter in response to the identities of others and family events. Individuals negotiate pathways

through the different processes and responses which they encounter as they proceed to construct identities and relationships. This permits diversity and variation (Demo and Allen 1996). The focus is on what individuals define as family relationships and how they express concepts of family. The life course is multidimensional, involving individuals and communities beyond the family. A postmodernist approach will not necessarily create total reorganisation and standardisation of family relationships. Family relationships are always in the process of continuous production and negotiation. There are no set patterns to how we construct identities and relations (Furstenberg and Spanier 1984; Grodin and Lindlof 1996).

Similarly, Featherstone (1991) argues that postmodernism directs us to changes taking place in contemporary society. It explores changes in the cultural sphere such as modes of production and consumption, but also the circulation of symbols and identities that are interdependent and shifting. It also examines changes in everyday practices, experiences and relationships that compete among each other, giving rise to new relationship and identity structures. Gergen (1991) also considers shifting identities and relationships when he argues for a postmodern process of "social saturation". For example, new technologies have allowed a greater number of people to communicate and form different relationships. Exposure to these identities means that we learn to adapt to our identities and those of others. Individuals can no longer rely on the old established, taken for granted ways of behaving and interacting. Interaction becomes a process of negotiation, guided by different means of reacting to or communicating with others. Identities are constructed and experienced as numerous, dormant in one situation, alive in another situation. As Weeks (1991;1995) argues, identities have become problematic. Identities are comprised of fragments of history, social and personal experience. Identities allow for identification across differences.

In the same vein, McLeod and Crawford (1998) argue for a "postmodern family", which can be seen in the light of these changing perspectives and challenge the rules of conventional gender and sexuality that underpin traditional approaches to the family as universal or heterosexual. Like McCleod and Crawford, Stacey (1996) is concerned with the postmodern family's condition of flexibility. Postmodern families provide an opportunity to democratise gender, sexual and familial relationships. Advances in reproductive technology, changing work patterns and globalisation have weakened the traditional family as perceived by structural functionalism. The increase in single parents, working mothers, and some countries' willingness

to recognise lesbian and gay partnership demonstrate the rise of the postmodern family.

Recognition of change and flexibility is also significant in the work of Beck-Gernsheim (1998). She argues that whereas the pre-industrial family was based on obligation and solidarity, modern families are based on an elective relationship. The family is more of a freely chosen act. It is based on personal preferences and choices. The family is no longer formed through pre-determined values and obligations. Fluidity and uncertainty in kinship relations take its place. The traditional family loses its monopoly. For example, people from different ethnic backgrounds and cultures get married today. The differences involved entails that individuals have no pre-determined guides to making a family work. Families must construct their own "togetherness" (Beck-Gernsheim 1998). Relationships require planning and careful negotiation. Cancian (1987) also argues that "flexible" families are part of a long-term trend towards tolerance for difference, androgyny, the acceptance of some kind of free-market economy and the individualistic ideology that accompanies it. Ainslie and Feltey (1991) and Hyde (1993) also assert that changing family structure results in a variety of alternatives to traditional family structures. These are "wider families". Lesbian families are an example. They are based on self-identification and mutual negotiation rather than biology and legal discourses. This allows for a deeper understanding of all human relationships. The concept of "family" is fluid and malleable. It is re-defined as a network of constructed and negotiated relations between different individuals. For example, Blumenfeld and Raymond (1988) argue that lesbian and gay families can be comprised of people of all ages living together. To sum up, the postmodern approach to the family dispenses with unitary and functionalist theories of the family such as Parsonian theory and Marxism. Instead, it argues for an approach, which explores how individuals "do" families through constructing, consuming and negotiating different identities and relationships.

The Individual and Social Identities

Debates around identity have also centred upon the conflict and relationship between individual and personal identities and social identities. Jenkins (1996) argues that identity is a necessary prerequisite for social life. The reverse is also the case. Individual identity cannot be understood without reference to others. Individuals define and redefine each other in a process of interaction (Mead 1934). Jenkins refers to the internal-external dialectic. Individuals may assert identities,

but other people within the social world must validate these identities. Goffman (1969) argues that an individual can never guarantee that the way he or she asserts an identity will be interpreted by others in the way the individual might want it to be construed. Matza (1969) argues that one can internalise the way one is externally defined, particularly if other individuals with authority label others, usually in an institutional setting. Jenkins (1996) argues for a distinction between group identification and social categorisation. One may consciously identify with a specific group, for example, the black community, or the lesbian and gay community. However, as Goffman (1963) notes, society establishes a complex external and hierarchical categorisation system that labels certain groups and individuals. Jenkins (1996) argues that these two processes feed upon each other.

The Broad Debate and the Research

I will now look at how the theoretical framework relates to my own research on lesbian and gay identities and families. The broader sociological debates centre on where identities come from and how these identities are constructed and negotiated. Drawing upon recent arguments around identities in postmodernity, my research will look at the construction and negotiation of identities among a range of areas of social life. Marcus (1992:315) argues,

> The identity of anyone or any group is produced simultaneously in many different locales of activity by many different agents for many different purposes.

My research is predicated on this idea that identities are produced within a whole range of different locations. What I propose to do, however, is to concentrate specifically on certain locations that might affect the individual identities of lesbians and gays within their immediate families. I will explore how lesbians, gays and parents construct personal and individual sexual identities in relation to collective familial identities. I will also be focusing on the possible identities that may be assumed from and within the lesbian and gay communities and other areas of social life beyond the family.

Kellner (1992) argues that despite modernity's emphasis on a self-reflexive identity, identities continue to remain substantially fixed around a set of universal norms and roles. They

are assumed and organised into a stable recognised form, despite the potential for difference. Similarly, Gibbins and Reimer (1999) argue that diversity in modernity is organised as more "universal", "rationalised" and "self-regarding". Increased towns and cities, for example, meant that individuals organised identities around universal national or regional identities. Class, the State and the Church coordinated and routinised socialisation and identity. Different identities could be assumed, but they were universalised and rationalised. They provided coherence as developments such as industrial capitalism, a unitary education system and the consolidation of the class system changed people's lives as opposed to the certainties of traditional society.

Postmodern identities are less securely located, but are constructed among a whole range of different locations. Globalisation and the expansion of technologies and communications expand this process (Gergen 1991). Individualisation allows individuals to construct and express different self-narratives. New sources of the self in the media and discourse allow for self-narratives to replace or live side by side with modern narratives. Individuals are more aware and reflexively construct identities and relations according to need, context and what they think is best. Institutionalised and structured identities weaken as, for instance the nation state and the traditional family weaken (Kumar 1995). The collective identities of class, family or shared work experience become more pluralised. Individual identity becomes more privatised and is more likely to be organised around differences of gender, race, locality and sexuality. Beck (1992) sees the need for individuals, as a result, to find different ways of exploring, developing and relating to the identities of others. If relationships and identities are constructed and negotiated in postmodernity to a greater extent than in modernity (Gergen 1991; Edwards 1994; Weeks 1998), it seems appropriate to consider the construction of lesbian and gay identities in relation to an area, the family, which has largely been ignored. We abandon the search for a core identity in favour of exploring how different identities are constructed and negotiated. I will explore on which terms more than one identity may be constructed and integrated and which processes influence this. The changes in identities and relationships as a process and how identities and relationships, at different levels in different situations, are organised will be considered.

I think the research will inevitably shed some light on the debate around social identities versus the ability to construct personal identities. The concept of "difference" is important here. By belonging to an ascribed collectivity, Jenkins (1996) argues that one accepts the rights of

others to judge one by certain standards. We also seek to be validated by others and the social identity. However, continued membership of a social identity does not rest upon, for example, material access. Rather, the correct, appropriate performance of that identity determines continued membership. The research then will seek to explain how personal and individual identity construction may be reinvented in changing relationships within the social group.

To sum up, the research is predicated on a broad debate concerning how identities and relationships are created and negotiated. The research will seek to address these issues on a more specific level: the construction of a lesbian or gay and familial identity within the family and other areas of the outside world such as work and the lesbian and gay communities.

SUMMARY

This chapter has analysed lesbian and gay identity formation models and research on the disclosure of a lesbian or gay identity to the immediate family. It concludes that identity formation models need to be expanded to account for further developments of a lesbian or gay identity within the immediate family. It also concludes that the limited research on coming out to the immediate family needs to be expanded to account for the development of a lesbian or gay identity following the initial disclosure within the family. The chapter suggests that we can generate a broad understanding of lesbian and gay identity formation and relationships between lesbians and gays and their immediate families by focusing upon an internal and external theme. It then proceeded to locate the research on lesbians and gays and their immediate families within a broad theoretical framework, that of different relationships, identities and family diversity in postmodernity. A discussion of the methodology to be used to explore further developments in identity construction and familial relations will be addressed in Chapter 2.

CHAPTER 2

THE RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

This chapter first explains my personal commitment to the research. I also examine etiological and structural approaches to lesbians, gays and the family. I will then proceed to argue that if we are to consider developments in reactions and relationships following disclosure, then this is best achieved through a qualitative approach. Finally, I look at the design and uses of the research tools, the sampling procedure and expand on the pilot study, the main study, and data analysis.

MY PERSONAL COMMITMENT TO THE RESEARCH

The need for more research into lesbians and gays and the family is the result of its limited presence within lesbian and gay studies. The early gay liberation ideology emphasised that the family was not conducive to a lesbian or gay identity. It was assumed that coming out would entail the process of leaving the family or breaking all contacts with the family. Of course, this ideology was developed during the 1960s when the family as an institution was very much in question, particularly, by feminists. Nevertheless, feminists were open-minded enough to develop a whole range of theories to deal with such a complex institution. The little work done on the family by lesbian and gay liberationists continued to rely on the idea that the family was anti-lesbian and gay. I also think that there was a reluctance to consider the family within the lives of lesbians and gays because it would have meant devoting significant time focusing upon heterosexuality, an inevitable consequence of theorising heterosexual families.

Yet by ignoring families, we fail to generate much needed theory concerning the future developments of identities and family relations. Heterosexuality did not stop a whole generation of feminists from analysing the heterosexual nuclear family after all. We could imagine the poverty that would exist within the politics and sociology of the family if this were so. It was through my reading of feminisms, as an undergraduate that I became interested in the family,

particularly feminist theorising. Radical feminism tended to focus on the family and sexuality, as did lesbian feminism. Adrienne Rich (1980) assumes that the only way that a lesbian could identify as lesbian was by breaking away from the family and its patriarchal associations.

However, I found this view far too deterministic. I did not want to deny that even to this day, many lesbians and gays continue to have negative experiences within their families following disclosure (e.g. Weston 1991). Nevertheless, the family has undergone many changes. That is why I propose to concentrate on the experiences of lesbians and gays within their immediate families. Contact and interactions between the lesbian or gay individual and family members does continue, even if the individual does not physically reside with the family of origin anymore.

Krieger (1991) argues that social science should concern itself less with mapping "external realities" and consider how our own experiences and perceptions influence our research. To acknowledge how our selves and experiences shape our research makes for more informative and interesting research. Krieger believes that our inner worlds critically influence what we chose to research and how we go about it. Research becomes more personal and human, allowing others to be able to relate to and understand it on their level. My own polymorphous background also influences my commitment to such research. Thanks to feminists, I recently began to reflect upon the influence of the sort of family structure and ideology in which I myself was brought up. As a child I would have considered myself "normal", simply because much of my childhood was spent within a nuclear family. I can remember fairly distinct gender roles. Because I had no other access to gay or bisexual discourses, it was rather difficult to recognise and interpret sexual and emotional feelings for other men.

However, on the positive side, I do still have a family of origin I can turn to in times of need. There is no complete understanding, but neither have I been ostracised. Lesbian and gay lifestyles and their families also challenge conventional interpretations of the family (Mcleod and Crawford 1998). If lesbians and gay men subvert the family in numerous ways, then such research is appropriate to what is often termed as "subversive sociology" (Butler 1990), a sociology that subverts the common-sense assumptions that underlay society. It can disrupt the

categories that we take for granted and permit new perspectives. I will now review some past methodological perspectives concerning lesbians and gays and their families.

PAST PERSPECTIVES: ETIOLOGY, LESBIANS AND GAYS AND THE FAMILY

Freud (1924/1995) and Fernbach (1981) constitute two leading catalysts in etiological work. They argue that sexuality in general, and lesbian and gay identities, in particular, are created within the realms of the family. It is this reality that defines sexual identity throughout life, never subject to flux or malleability. Both also perceive the family as the primary institution through which children are coerced into resolving any gender or sexual ambivalence and to identify with the parent of the same sex. Fernbach argues that heterosexuality is imputed with esteemed status as a result of the need to retain the sexual and gender division of labour. The heterosexual pairbond is what maintains this division of labour. It works so as to suppress female sexuality and to compound the dominant male sexuality. This sexual system is institutionalised within the family, which aims to suppress same-sex attraction.

Freud and Fernbach argue that both males and females are born into a masculine and feminine world. The most visible symbol of this is the heterosexual nuclear family. However, the most significant aspect of this "bi-sexual" world was the maternal aspect. Males and females may be regarded as different by parents and society, but the first few years are characterised by dependence on a dominant mother for sustenance and maintenance. It is vital to the survival of the child. A child's first experiences are seen through a feminine perspective. This is what Fernbach (1981) refers to as the "maternal culture".

Freud

Freud argues that either one of the parents will come to assume the most importance. The father tends to assume more of an attached and affectionate relationship with his daughter. The mother tends to assume a more affectionate relationship with the son. Children begin to sexually manipulate and identify with the member of the opposite sex. Freud refers to this as the "Oedipus complex". However, there comes a time when the Oedipus complex is to be resolved and a different pattern of relationships emerge based upon same gender identification. The

"limited" interactions within the family are the primary mechanism for this resolution.

The dissolution of the oedipal complex will entail it being banished into the unconscious or being relinquished altogether. According to Freud, the Oedipus complex coexists with a phallic phase. This is where both the male and the female child become interested in the penis. As the male child matures, he is restrained from playing with his penis by the parents. He may be warned that the penis will be cut off, or even that his hand may be severed. Nevertheless, Freud argues, the warnings are rarely heeded and the boy continues to gain pleasure through the touching of the penis.

The threat of castration only becomes real at the observation of the female genitalia. The girl comes to see that she possesses less than the boy does and that she has already been castrated. The boy will relinquish all oedipal desires in order to retain his penis, following the observation of a "castrated person", the girl. He will come to identify with the person, who has the penis, the father. The girl envies the penis and blames her mother for her lack of one. However, she comes to identify with her mother, who has suffered the same fate. She is nevertheless compensated by "marrying" the person with the penis and the possibility of having a baby as a substitute for the missing penis.

Badcock (1988) refers to the resolution of the Oedipus conflict as an "If you can't beat them, join them" process: the process of identifying with someone who is similar. However, where oedipal conflicts do not resolve themselves, other possibilities exist. A son may not identify with the father, but with the mother instead, leading to a negative resolution. This could lead to the son becoming gay. In other words, the son has not given up on the mother. He internalises her and comes under a feminine influence. Because of that identification with the mother, he, like her, chooses men as his sexual objects. In the case of females, Freud argues that some refuse to accept that they have already been castrated and only possess an inferior clitoris. Females develop a masculine complex and become lesbian on the grounds that they have developed characteristics which are more male orientated.

Fernbach

Fernbach argues that as childhood progresses, children are painfully compressed into specific gender roles. Females internalise femininity and the maternal role, which is devalued in the modern world and come to accept male domination. Acceptance of male domination is difficult for females to initially accept but the learning of "beautification" palliates this. This involves learning the desirability of being a sex object to men and understanding its advantages.

Males, however, must give up their initial identification with the mother and learn that he must emulate his father. Having to sever the loving association with the maternal culture is a painful process, but the rewards are greater. Emulation of the father will lead to access to the independence of adult status that is the masculine preserve, the manipulation of the maternal environment and the material world. Despite some inequalities between men, all men will at least have some minimal power over their wife and children.

The family is the primary agent in the reproduction of gender roles. Heterosexuality is the by-product of the patterned reproduction of gender roles. As long as girls internalise femininity and boys, masculinity, then as a general rule, they will be compatible and devise the heterosexual pairbond. According to Fernbach, gay men have failed to complete the masculinisation process. Femininity is retained. The family has created the "deviation" through its inability to masculinise the son. Beautification is learned from the mother and the son begins to seek out other men as sexual objects. Since the father cannot respond to the effeminacy of his son in the same way that he could were it his daughter, the son begins to seek other men outside of the family as an object of desire.

Etiology: an evaluation

Richardson (1984) argues that etiological perspectives of lesbians and gays are too essentialist and that there is a need to focus on how sexual identities change over the lifespan. Etiological work on families is rigid and deterministic because it concentrates upon childhood experiences where children have not adequately internalised the means of physically and mentally mastering the world. It is too characterised by "dependency". Family structure, which is part of the family

as a context and background, is ignored by such theories. As Poster (1978) points out, Freud never talks about how children may be able to manipulate the social environment. It is as if relationships were biologically fixed to the point where the parent-child relationship is static. As Hart (1981) points out, the etiological significance of any one variable in the development of a lesbian or gay identity is contingent upon how it interacts with other factors, and the meaning which the individual imputes to these interactions. No one factor can determine lesbian and gay identity formation. It is a unique process and we cannot generalise.

Also, etiological perspectives only deal with causation (Laird 1993), rather than the process associated with maintaining a sexual identity. Relationships, meanings and narratives need to be addressed (Laird 1996). A far broader outlook is required. This involves moving from etiology towards viewing the family and lesbian and gay identity as socially constructed and negotiated. Robinson et al. (1982) argue that methodological flaws are most likely to bias empirical work on family relationships, leading to the conclusion that dysfunctional interaction between parents and children "causes" a lesbian or gay identity. Data is only collected from samples where the father is missing, for instance, due to divorce. Yet they point out that in their national data report, the majority of gay men described relations with their parents as satisfactory.

Etiological perspectives are also too essentialist in that both conceive of gender identity and gender roles, as constructed in the family, as being the leading determinant in assuming sexual identity. In other words, a lesbian or gay identity or heterosexual identity is determined by the gender characteristics that we assume in the family. As Altman (1971:5) asserts,

> There is a connection between sexual roles and predilections, but it is more complicated than assuming that being gay or lesbian is a matter of wanting to be of the other sex.

To conclude, etiological perspectives concerning sexual identities and the family appear too deterministic and essentialist since they focus on limited relationships between parents and their children in order to find the one cause of a lesbian or gay identity (MacDonald 1984; Richardson 1984; Beard and Glickauf-Hughes 1994). Nevertheless, etiological studies of

lesbian and gay identity and the family have been employed as a catalyst for pre-empting lesbian and gay politics. This encouraged early lesbian and gay liberation to coalesce around an essentialist unitary identity as a means of advancing lesbian and gay politics. In addition to etiological perspectives are structural perspectives of lesbian and gay identity and the family. These concentrate on the social structural processes that give rise to a lesbian and gay identity. I will now briefly consider the work of John D'Emilio as an example of a structural approach.

D'EMILIO AND A STRUCTURAL PERSPECTIVE OF LESBIANS AND GAYS AND THE FAMILY

D'Emilio (1983) views the connection between lesbians and gay identities and the family from a structural perspective. Lesbian and gay identities are an invention of history and have not always existed. Lesbian and gay identity emerges as the consequence of capitalist relations. Capitalism initiated the free labour system, which attenuated the nuclear family. This allowed more people to reside outside of the family, and also precipitated the development of a lesbian and gay identity. As more lesbians and gays found themselves outside, they were able to coalesce into independent lesbian and gay communities and make reference to themselves as part of this identity. The structure of capitalism, particularly its labour and wage system, caused a transformation in the functions of the nuclear family, the ideology of the nuclear family and perceptions of heterosexual relationships.

Before capitalism, the family was the all-pervasive institution of society, since it was the primary economic unit. Each member was closely dependent on the other for economic survival. The advent of capitalism altered these necessities. Individuals, who once relied upon household production to survive were pulled out into the factories. Capitalism deprived the economic self-sufficiency of many families. It made the family take on a new ideal, that of an institution of love and affection. It became the personal sphere, where men and women developed mutual and affectionate relations separated from the public sphere of, for instance, work, and the private and public split had begun. Sex was no longer about producing off-spring and the reproduction of children as economic units was no longer necessary.

Capitalism ideologically altered the nature of heterosexual relations, making them more pleasure and intimacy orientated. It also created conditions that permitted lesbian and gay people to arrange their lives around this same-sex attraction. Urban communities were formed which could be founded upon a political and sexual identity. Before capitalism, lesbian and gay behaviour had existed; however, individuals who had participated in this behaviour could not actually refer to themselves as gay or lesbian or assume a gay or lesbian identity. This was due to the prevalence and dominance of the nuclear family. This stifled any identity that transgressed its boundaries. There simply was no category of lesbian or gay that existed to describe a person who participated in same-sex sexual behaviour. It was only when people began to make a living through wage labour, rather than the family that it was possible for lesbian and gay desire to be transformed into an identity. This identity is founded upon the capacity to remain outside the nuclear family. Personal autonomy would be attained through suppression of the family.

However, despite capitalism and its allowance of a freer identity, there is still a strong interconnection between the system and the family. Capitalist society continues to be both heterosexist and homophobic. This is because capitalism only changes the functions of the family. It does not change the ideology of the nuclear family. In fostering notions of privacy, affection and intimacy, it actually elevates the family as the only environment where these can occur. Children also continue to be raised through heterosexist modes of child rearing.

The strength of D'Emilio's work is that it allows for an explanation of an identity politics, that of individuals free from the oppression of the family, which etiological theories cannot transgress. Nevertheless, the main problem is that D'Emilio believes that he can account for both identity developments in the cases of both lesbians and gays. But he argues that lesbians are not as visible as men due to women's continued economic dependence upon men. If economic dependence keeps them reticently at home, then it is difficult to employ D'Emilio's work to account for a lesbian identity and the family in the same way as gay men. This is because lesbians only partially break free of the family and its institutionalised heterosexuality. I will now turn to an approach that I think is more appropriate to research into lesbians and gays and their families.

AN ALTERNATIVE QUALITATIVE APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF LESBIANS AND GAYS AND THE FAMILY

Etiological theories analyse the essential causes of a lesbian or gay identity within static, psychodynamic relations within the family (e.g., Freud 1924/1995; Fernbach 1981). An identity remains static, deriving solely from the family. It ignores the fact that an identity can be subject to alteration and compromise. A qualitative approach views the family as a background, context and environment where sexual identities and familial relationships are constructed and negotiated. Behaviour and relationships are seen within their context (Bryman 1988). Social entities such as communities and families are also understood in their entirety. The meanings which individuals impute to their own, and each other's behaviour, are seen in the contexts of relationships and practices (Maxwell 1996). Behaviour is seen within a context of the values, social practices and underlying structures of communities and families. As Bryman (1988) points out, the emphasis is on the interpretation of a given situation in terms of an understanding of the whole group and the meanings it has for all participants involved. Events can only be understood when they are situated in a wider social and cultural context. I decided that my qualitative approach would be predicated on two main approaches, that of symbolic interactionism and social constructionism.

Symbolic interactionism focuses on understanding meanings and interactions. Individuals will act towards things through the meanings and interpretations that are imputed to them (Blumer 1969; Gecas and Libby 1976). These meanings derive from interaction that we assume with the world. Nevertheless, these meanings may be altered, diluted and modified through an interpretative process throughout this interaction (Vance 1989; Rock 1990). As Plummer (1975; 1995; 1996) states, the world may be perceived as a subjective state, constructed through a process of continuous interaction with the social environment. The symbolic environment is paramount within symbolic interactionism. Human beings reside in and generate an environment of language, symbols and gesture. This permits them to impute meanings to objects and human action so as to interpret the world around them. Such meanings and interpretations can be further employed to recreate interaction. Objects and action arise and they are human constructs. No meaning is absolutely intrinsic within an object. Rather, the meaning is imputed through a process of interaction, communication and interpretation.

Interpretation is the process of setting forth meanings of events and experiences (Denzin 1989).

Meanings are defined through the intentions and actions of individuals. Symbols and meanings allow individuals to develop a sense of self and consciousness (Hewitt 1984). We become objects to ourselves. We have the ability to use symbols to imagine the responses of others to our own acts and experiences. Interaction is consistently active. Denzin (1989) asserts that in social life, there is only interpretation. Events and interactions take place over time. They have an inner sense of history. Interaction occurs within larger historical structures. Language, for instance, can shape taken for granted cultural meanings. Individuals within interaction bring a personal biography that is historically shaped. Plummer (1995) uses the symbolic interactionist approach in his book, "Telling Sexual Stories". He demonstrates how social and cultural processes and meanings are produced through the use of changing and shared symbols.

Similarly, LaRossa and Reitzes (1993) point out that symbolic interactionism pays specific attention to contextualism and meaning. It looks at how behaviour is influenced by culture and how culture is affected by behaviour. The individual is seen within different contexts, for example, groups and the wider society. Strauss (1978) refers to the "negotiated order approach" to the organisation of the social world. Three concepts make up this approach, negotiation, negotiation context and structural context. Negotiation refers to the many different means of accomplishing things in interaction with others. This involves such things as, for example, bargaining and compromising. Negotiation context refers to structural properties that immediately influence negotiation between individuals. The reaction of a parent to a child's disclosure of their sexuality could be different if he or she suspected it as compared to a parent who did not. Structural context is the wider societal context within which interaction takes place. Negative, mainstream societal stereotypes could influence how a parent reacts to the disclosure of a child's sexuality.

The importance of looking at context and meaning when examining lesbians' experience of the family life cycle is considered by Slater and Mencher (1993). They argue that lesbians and their partners face different situations throughout their lives, not usually faced by heterosexuals. Mainstream values and rituals such as courtship and marriage are rarely used to validate a lesbian relationship. Slater and Mencher argue then that lesbian relationships should

be seen within their contexts and meanings that differ from how heterosexuals experience their relationships. I will now proceed to consider social constructionism and its influence on the qualitative approach

Burr (1995) and Schwandt (1998) emphasise that social constructionism has its roots in symbolic interactionism in that it is concerned with the interaction of social actors. However, Schwandt (1998) argues that constructionism is more critical of essentialism and the search for objective knowledge, viewing these as the result of perspective. Constructionism takes a critical stance towards positivism, accentuating that the world cannot be seen through objective, unbiased observation. Rather, it is relativist, viewing all categories as historically and culturally constructed (Gergen 1985). All means of understanding are culturally and historically relevant and should be seen within their context. Knowledge is constructed and identities are performed through social practices, social processes and discourses. Different social practices and processes will precipitate different human actions in different individuals and historical circumstances. Some constructionists argue that symbolic interactionism views people's understanding of their worlds as deriving from the individual, that emotion, language and words are pre-given and constitute an essential part of the self. Yet for constructionists, the concepts by which the world can be understood are social artefacts that are produced by historically and relationally situated interaction between individuals. Accounts and experiences occur within shared systems of intelligibility, for instance, language. These accounts are best seen as the expressions of relationships among individuals. Meanings are collectively generated through language and social processes.

McIntosh (1990) argues that "homosexuals" play a social role and and are not the result of a medical condition. The "homosexual" role does not exist in all societies, but appeared in England towards the end of the seventeenth century. Kitzinger (1987) argues that essential lesbians do not exist. They are socially constructed by society as subordinate, due to prevailing ideas about femininity and the requirement that feminine women must be heterosexual. Gatter (1998) uses a constructionist approach in his book, "Identity and Sexuality: AIDS in Britain in the 1990s". He argues that the written word and the telling of stories in different contexts are part of the performance of sexual identities in modern Britain. Shotter and Gergen (1994) asserts that social constructionism is a view of knowledge that sees social interaction as situated,

developmental and relational. It pays particular attention to how identities and relationships are developed through communication. Understandings and negotiations are formed through social practices. There is no isolated or universal theory of knowledge or communication. Reality is constructed through discursive communication. Focus is on the context of individuals' language, different words, and multiple conversations, which are employed in the social construction of relationships and identities. Constructionism also shares some similarities to postmodernism as a research strategy too. Lyotard (1984/1994) argues against grand narratives and universal categories and emphasises local and contextual approaches to social inquiry. Social difference, ambiguity and pluralism are accentuated. Grand narratives are decentred in favour of a focus on how knowledge and human relations are socially and locally constructed. There are no fixed or pre-given meanings or knowledge. Similarly, Gergen (1991: 1996) argues that there are no longer any fixed boundaries. Instead, the focus of social inquiry should be on how individuals construct their social worlds through language, self-narratives and discourse. There is no objective truth outside of how individuals construct relationships through language and social interaction. Social interaction is important to Bernardes (1997) who argues for a postmodernist approach to families. She argues that we should look into how individuals constantly invent and reinvent the social world through discourse and social relationships. Human production of different identities and knowledge assumes significance in a postmodern approach. Butler (1994) also considers difference and contexts when she argues that "subjects" are always placed within a cultural context. These cultural contexts exist before the agent, both influencing and constituting the agent. Butler argues that these cultural contexts enable individuals to negotiate and interact with the external world. These cultural contexts allow researchers to consider how subjects might be able to mobilise politically in order to confront power and discourse. Identities, power and discourses are subject to individual negotiation and alteration, but individuals can also be stalled and constrained by them.

Like symbolic interactionism, constructionism informs a qualitative approach in that it is anti-essentialist and rejects realism and its emphasis upon objective social facts. Language is seen as the very pre-condition of thought. It is through language and social practices that the world is constructed. Kitzinger (1995) has distinguished "weak" constructionism from "strong" constructionism. Weak constructionism accepts that categories are socially produced, but also holds on to some essentialist framework; for example, that biological sex underlines all the

divergent constructions of gender and sex roles. However, strong constructionism, for example, Wittig (1981) would dismiss all biological connotations and argue that the concept of woman is not a natural category, but a political category.

A qualitative approach based on symbolic interactionism, social constructionism and the search for meaning, context and subjectivity is subject to criticism. As Gatter (1998) points out, constructionist and interactionist methodologies go too far in seeing identities, meanings and interpretations as malleable. It cannot explain a strong sense of self or how identities might stabilise. Also Cohen (1994) asserts that they fail to grasp the relationships between the individual self and the group self. Symbols, for example, can be interpreted differently by an individual, yet still hold a more stable, collective meaning for a social group. However, as I mentioned in Chapter 1, my research is focusing on individuals within a wider group, their families. This can allow us some insight into how certain identities, for example, the familial identity, can stabilise and be employed by lesbians and gays, in day to day interaction. Now that I have considered the qualitative approach, I will discuss how the research methods are influenced by the qualitative approach and discuss the construction of them.

THE RESEARCH METHODS

Interviews

Much of the research concerning lesbians, gays and the family, though by no means all, is conducted by using standard questionnaires (e.g., Robinson et al. 1982; Savin-Williams 1989; Strommen 1989; Ben-Ari 1995; Waldner and Magruder 1999). Standard questionnaires have managed to identify meanings and attitudes. But these meanings have been identified by stating a limited number of categories for the respondent to choose from. This research uses in-depth semi-standardised interviews which aims to ascertain the experiences of heterosexual and lesbian and gay members of the family, their perceptions and their feelings, in order to enrich previous work. The interview guide can be found in the appendix.

Interviewing lesbians and gays is conducive to the qualitative approach that I outlined in the previous section. Interviews permit the appropriate means of obtaining access to

consciousness, consciousness of respondents' situations and relationships within families. It was a means of obtaining access to the core of interaction and meaning within the family. As Seidman (1991) asserts, what is most significant to what it is to be human, is the capability to symbolise experience through language. It is at the root of all human inquiry. Seidman concludes, the interview is most congruous with people's capacity to generate meaning through language. It can affirm the significance of the individual without belittling the possibility of context and collaboration. It is a means of capturing "lived experience" (Padgett 1998). Interviews permit us to analyse socially meaningful action through detailed communication between respondent and interviewer. The qualitative approach seeks to understand social life and discover how people construct and interpret social meaning and action. Interviews permit us a means of understanding how people create and maintain their social worlds. As Neuman (1994) asserts, qualitative researchers can understand respondents' points of view by learning their feelings and interpretations and by seeing the social world through their eyes.

The qualitative approach advocates that human action involves little intrinsic meaning (Neuman 1994). Interviews will uncover how systems of meaning are constructed and shared and also the different meanings and interpretations that are imputed to these systems. The qualitative approach views social life as emerging through people's construction and definitions of it. Identities emerge through meaningful interaction between individuals. These identities can change as they are constructed and interpreted differently in different contexts and locations. They are never static, unchanging or intrinsic to an individual, object or situation. Interviews can inform us of changing definitions and people's internally experienced sense of reality. The qualitative approach is naturalistic (Patton 1990). It intends to explore interaction and relationships as constructed in a naturalistic setting that has no predetermined course established by and for the researcher. Rather, the qualitative approach is employed to understand "naturally occurring phenomena" in their "naturally occurring states" (Patton 1990). Hence, it is intent upon discovery and inductive logic. The researcher makes sense of the situation that he or she is studying without imposing preconceptions or expectations on them. Interviews allowed me to get close to respondents so as to understand the realities of their lives. This permits description and understanding of both externally observable behaviour and internal subjective states, for instance, attitudes and opinions.

On a more practical level, the semi-standardised in-depth interview allows the interviewee time to collect thoughts and make connections with other examples and processes that he or she has previously recollected without being limited by categorisations and evaluative assessments. The loose questions can be phrased within ways that do not lead respondents to give leading answers. There is also the possibility of probes to help respondents recollect past experiences. As Padgett (1998) asserts, qualitative methods of research capture knowledge of the social world through prolonged engagement with respondents. Patton (1990) asserts that this permits a holistic qualitative approach. For example, we can obtain access to different contexts and interdependencies.

The semi-standardised interview gave me an interview guide with set questions. However, the questions allowed me to probe and ask follow up questions if that was necessary. In-depth semi-standardised interviews permit an understanding of the situation from the point of view of those being researched. I believe that interviews are of most use to me in analysing the social construction of lesbian and gay identities in the family. The emphasis upon understanding social processes from the point of view of the agent is of particular importance, particularly as lesbian and gay people have been denied a positive identity by the mainstream society. It permitted respondents to define and explain their situation and views within an open-ended framework. The respondents were permitted extensive leeway to define the situation and to explain the different experiences and processes. In-depth semi-standardised interviews appeared to constitute the most appropriate and effective means of analysing how identities are constructed in interaction with families. Interviews exposed the process of how lesbians and gays and family members construct and impute meanings to their social environment.

Semi-standardised interviews can also constitute a more "focused" interview, the endeavour to combine elements of the unstructured interview and the structured interview. When we are talking about our lesbian or gay identity and how it affects relationships with the family, we are communicating on a personal level about personal experiences. Hence, semi-standardised interviews would make data collection less spurious. It makes the relationship between the interviewer and the respondent more ordinary and more akin to everyday life. The interview becomes a “partnership” between respondent and interviewer (Padgett 1998). There was also less chance of being deprived of useful and rich information by employing interviews.

Unanticipated reactions and experiences can be accounted for. This leads into the possibility of asking different questions as the interview progresses. It also allowed for new leads as questions are revised on the basis of the new information.

Also, I think that in-depth semi-standardised interviews also begin to rectify ethical issues concerning the research. Allowing respondents to proceed at their own pace gives them more control over the interview. It allowed for a less formal environment. It also entailed that the respondent had some control over what he or she disclosed. This permits a degree of freedom to both the respondent and myself. What is asked and disclosed can be negotiated over time. As Neuman (1994) reports, interviews are a joint production between the interviewer and the interviewee. It is a mutual sharing of experiences.

The interview guides for both the lesbian and gay respondents and the parents were designed to obtain a rich web of meanings and attitudes, so as to understand the experiences of lesbians, gays and their parents. The interview guide was designed using much of Lofland's (1971) approach. Lofland advocates that we begin by thinking about certain relevant questions or what Glaser and Strauss (1967) refer to as "analytical and sensitising" concepts. These are significant and useful topics worth considering as questions in the interview guide. These are then sorted out into topically related themes. This enables one to arrive at a logical and orderly interview guide. As Padgett (1998) observes, it also allows maximum opportunity to assess the relevance and clarity of the research tool. I began by reflecting what the most important questions to ask might be. I then sorted them into which ones were most relevant to the research themes. For instance, the question, "What were the first reactions of your mother when you came out?" is designed to obtain information concerning the internal theme of the research. Also, when considering which types of questions should be included, I was influenced by Lofland and Lofland's (1984) argument that research questions should be based on two different types. The first are those that describe "states", for example, a description of the causes of a given phenomenon. In the second case, the research question addresses how certain phenomena develops or changes. In other words, it looks at processes, consequences and strategies. Such types of question are relevant to a qualitative approach that focuses on meanings, contexts and processes (Padgett 1998).

The interview guide was initially divided into five components: 1. a brief section on pre-coming out, 2. coming out to mother and relationships with mother, 2. coming out to father and relationships with father, 3. coming out to siblings and relationships with siblings, 4. experiences of the outside world and the lesbian and gay communities, as compared to experiences within the families, and 5. the importance and interconnections between gay, lesbian, and familial identities.

The parents' interview guide was devised to be similar to the lesbian and gay respondent interview guide. This allows parents to give information about their experiences of the same situations. Many of the same questions are asked of the parents, but, of course, they are phrased differently. The parental interview has been divided into three sections: 1. the experience of a lesbian daughter or gay son initially disclosing her or his sexuality; 2. the process in between coming out to the present day; 3. a brief section on post-coming out experiences.

The Questionnaire

The aim of the questionnaire, which can be found in the appendix, is to obtain some biographical data about each individual respondent. It was helpful to know some information about the respondents before embarking on the main interview. It allowed the respondent to become more acquainted with the research before the interview. It also allowed me to obtain some brief knowledge about the respondent's background. The questionnaire was constructed using a "mixed format" approach (Sarantakos 1998). Questions appeared according to the logic of the project. The first section dealt with some brief biographical details and moved on to the section concerned with coming out to parents. I began by reviewing the questions asked in previous research, but in relation to lesbians, gays and the family. This permitted me to think of possible questions that could shed some light on issues concerning lesbians, gays and parents. For example, I could ask questions as to how close respondents felt towards their parents.

The process of questionnaire construction was guided by the suggestions of Puris (1995). The construction follows a number of interrelated drafts. The process of creating numerous drafts addresses and checks the relevance, clarity and simplicity of the questions. The new draft was tested with the main interview in the pilot study. The final draft was

accomplished by making some minor changes as a result of the pilot study. For example, the term lesbian and gay communities was changed to "lesbian and gay scene" as this enhanced the clarity of the term for respondents. The structure of the questionnaire was designed to correspond to the main interview guide. For example, it briefly covered coming out to oneself, coming out to parents and a question concerning how close respondents felt to the lesbian and gay world. All questions were "closed-ended". A respondent is asked a question and is presented with fixed responses to choose from (May 1997). I now turn to the sampling procedure to be employed in this research.

SAMPLING

Arber (1993) argues that the way in which one designs a sample will depend on one's research goals. My aim is to interview a small group of lesbians and gays, and some of their parents, in order to understand lesbians and gays and the family. As Patton (1990) asserts, sampling for qualitative inquiry is guided by the desire to shed light upon the questions under study and to increase the scope to uncover meanings and contexts.

First of all, I defined the population to be sampled. I initially defined these as lesbians or gay men, from the age of sixteen upwards. Individuals between these ages are more likely to still be in contact with relatives. I initially set the age of thirty-five as the end of the age range. However, when I interviewed a lesbian at the age of thirty-five, I realised that individuals at the top of the age range did have a wealth of experience to disclose. This was even if they did not see their parents as often as younger individuals might. I also now realise that much of the previous research on disclosure of sexuality and subsequent parental reactions, concentrates upon individuals in the lower age ranges (e.g., Savin-Williams 1989; Boxer et al. 1991; Ben-Ari 1995). I suspect that this is because researchers, again, want to concentrate upon those who have recently disclosed and will have more information to disclose. Most respondents were "out" to both their parents. This avoided the problem of having, for example, more respondents who are only out to one parent, as opposed to those who are only out to both parents. However, some respondents in the sample were only able to talk about one parent as the result of, for example, the death of a parent. Also, individuals were selected on the basis of their current sexual identity, rather than sexual behaviour. Respondents who previously identified differently will,

then, not be cancelled out. This leads me on to the kind of sampling that I would use.

A sampling frame is a list of the members of the population under investigation and is employed to select the sample (Spreen 1992). However, there exists no actual sample frame to which I could refer to. Kalton (1993) refers to "rare" populations, which are less socially visible. Members of that population are not readily identifiable by others. Because of the social stigma around lesbian and gay sexual orientation and behaviour, the lesbian and gay population can often be hidden (Coxon 1995). This is one of the most insurmountable problems facing researchers of lesbian and gay identity (Dank 1974; Harry 1986). The sample, then, will obviously be a "purposive" sample. The chance of selection for each element within the population is not known. The most efficacious means of procuring a sample was through "snowballing" or "chain referral sampling" (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). Arber (1993) argues that this is one of the most effective means of sampling when no sampling frame is available. A person is initially selected and is then asked to propose another person they may know with analogous qualities. Referrals are made among people with similar characteristics. It offers a better means of sampling than, for instance, quota sampling, whereby one states specific characteristics of a group and then proceeds to investigate the percentage of the population with these characteristics. We then select the percentage of these people within the population with these defined traits. Padgett (1998) refers to snowball sampling as "convenience" sampling. Respondents become more available to the researcher.

The procedures used to contact lesbian and gay respondents were as follows: Firstly, contacts were made by approaching lesbian and gay social groups in different geographical locations, for example, London and Nottingham. These social groups arranged social activities for their members, for instance, trips to the theatre and the commercial scene, through to advice workshops on such topics as AIDS, coming out and managing homophobia. They were socially accessible (Cassell 1988) in that they were advertised in the lesbian and gay press. If a group or society appeared appropriate to the study, I then began proceedings to contact the members of the group. Secondly, I phoned the contact number of the group, which was usually a person who organised and ran the group. This allowed me to explain the research and ascertain more about the group, since the information in the press was usually limited to a brief description. It also allowed me to guarantee confidentiality. As Coxon et al. (1993) assert, confidentiality assumes

great importance when one's sexual orientation can be a guarded secret. If this person initially agreed, then we would arrange for me to visit the group. In many cases, the person who I contacted initially would volunteer to be interviewed. This increased confidence in the research among other members. The members could also be informed about my visit. Thirdly, a visit to the group allowed me to explain the research to members and begin recruiting. In some cases, I was allowed some time to explain the research to the group as a whole. Other times, I simply mingled with members, introducing myself and explaining it to them.

Those who were interviewed as a result were then asked if they could refer others outside of the group who would be willing to be interviewed. Some gave me phone numbers for other respondents immediately. Some asked me to call them back after they had asked the individual whether he or she might be willing to participate. Most interviews were conducted at home. However, some respondents chose to be interviewed in the building where the group met. Some respondents from Nottingham thought it best that I interviewed them at Nottingham Trent University, as they believed it would be more appropriate for a confidential interview. I will now discuss how the parents were contacted.

The parents were contacted through two procedures. After an interview with a respondent, he or she was asked whether their parent or both parents would be willing to be interviewed. Usually, the respondents would ask parents and we would arrange for them to give me a contact number for parents if they agreed. I would then contact parents, explain to them that I had previously interviewed their child and that he or she had informed me that there was a possibility that they may be willing to participate.

Other parents were contacted through Friends and Families of Lesbians and Gays (FFLAG), a support group for parents of lesbians and gays. I found their contact numbers in the lesbian and gay press. Regional organisers usually advertised their contact numbers. I would then phone them, explain the research, ask if they would be interested in participating, and if they knew of others who might be interested. In one case, I was sent the contact numbers of all the regional organisers in Britain. I was able to phone some of these and gain more respondents. These parents were interviewed if they gained consent from their children to participate too. All parent interviews were conducted in the home. This meant that some

parents could arrange for their child to be present so that I could interview them both separately on the same day. I will now proceed to examine the sampling procedures and their impact upon the data collection process in greater detail and evaluate their utility and representativeness.

The Process of Sampling, Generalisability and Representativeness

Initially, sampling proved to be a slow process. The first social group that I approached for interviewees was for lesbians and gays aged between 14-25, and which was advertised through the Nottingham lesbian and gay press. I was confronted with three difficulties. Firstly, I could not interview anyone over the age of 25. Secondly, I found that the young people did not have many associations with the commercial scene or other social groups, which I could approach next. Thirdly, I found that many of the group members had not disclosed to their parents, usually due to lack of confidence or fear of parental disapproval. Out of a group which had 15-20 members attending every week, I was only able to interview one. Sampling had become "excursionary" (Lee 1993). Contact with members depletes and the researcher begins exploring new locations for respondents. As Biernarcki and Waldorf (1981) point out, some locations of possible sampling, which might be expected to yield large numbers of respondents may not provide them. I then began contacting other groups, which were attended by individuals of a broader age range.

I was more successful having approached these groups. It meant that I was obtaining a broader range of individuals and there were more people willing to be interviewed. This provided me with more referrals. The referral chains had lengthened due to the wider range of individuals that I could approach. For example, some group members referred me to individuals on the scene but who did not attend their groups. Nevertheless, this further raised some important points to consider when snowball sampling. For example, Kalton (1993) argues that members of a "rare" population who have many contacts with other members of that population being sampled, have greater chances of being selected, than those with fewer contacts. Those who are socially isolated from members of the sampled population have minimal chances of selection. People vary systematically in their ability to nominate potential respondents (Lee 1993).

Many lesbians and gays, who did not then participate in social groups or who did not attend the commercial scene on a regular basis, will have been excluded from my sample. Such people may have different needs and means of managing their identities and familial relationships compared to those who attend social groups and the scene. This is a limitation in that the sample comprises more individuals, who are active in the lesbian and gay communities, rather than individuals who are representative of the lesbian and gay communities as a whole. Hence, it is not only the attributes of, for instance, identifying as lesbian or gay or being out to one's parents, which influences inclusion into the sample. The social structure and social ties of individuals also influence inclusion (Lee 1993). However, contacting individuals in social groups with broader age ranges and interests, meant that it was more likely that I could meet people who had developed positive lesbian and gay identities and interview them. This also increased the likelihood that they had disclosed to parents due to increased confidence with their sexuality. It should also be made clear that the sample did not comprise lesbians and gays who had been severely physically abused or harmed in the way that Weston (1991) and D'Augelli (1998) found. The vast majority of respondents were not at risk of violence from their parents. This was usually the case even where parents were negative towards their children and when respondents felt threatened by physical abuse beyond their families. Had I endeavoured to recruit from groups which offer support to lesbians and gays who have been physically abused or groups which support individuals who have been violently ejected from the parental home, I would have faced more problems of recruitment. For example, such groups are less easily accessed. Nevertheless, I do not want to play down the fact that lesbians and gays still face potential violence, abuse, and suicide in today's society and in the family (Martin 1982; Kourany 1987).

Biernacki and Waldorf (1981) assert that as snowball sampling proceeds, researchers must account for "substantive considerations". One of these considerations is the need to control the sample to ensure it includes an array of respondents which reflect the general characteristics of the sampled population in general, for instance that it includes men and women and individuals from various geographical locations and occupations. The researcher becomes more selective in who is included in the sample. An analysis of the first half of my interviews conducted showed that more men than women had been interviewed. I decided to begin to contact groups specifically for lesbians. It appeared that more men were attending the groups,

even though they referred to themselves as being for lesbians and gays. Women less frequently attended. As Jeffreys (1993) suggests, this reflects the lesser visibility of women in the economy and leisure in general. Future sampling was orientated towards contacting groups solely for lesbians and recruiting from them. New referral chains were established. A new starting point to recruit from began so as to gain a more extensive coverage of lesbians. I will now proceed to consider issues concerning the utility and effectiveness of snowballing as applied to the parents' sample.

As sampling of the individual respondents proceeded, I found that very few respondents were willing to refer their parents to me. Those who had negative parents did not feel it appropriate to refer them for interview. However, many who had parents who were now positive towards them were reluctant to refer them too. This was largely out of fear of what some called "dredging up the past" or "having to face it all again". This meant that I had to find a new means of increasing the sample. I achieved this through contacting parents who belonged to "Friends and Families of Lesbians and Gays" (FFLAG). This is a group established to support parents who have lesbian and gay children. The strategy was successful in increasing the number of parents interviewed. However, it did not help me to gain access to any parents who were negative about their children. Biernarcki and Waldorf (1981) and Kuzel (1992) argue that future sampling should be guided towards individuals and groups who might confirm existing theories. As many respondents were referring to negative experiences of disclosure to parents, it increased the necessity to interview negative parents. Not only would this confirm existing theories, which were emerging, but would provide more interviews with negative parents to compare with positive parents. Robinson et al. (1989) point out that parents of lesbians and gays who join such groups as FFLAG are accessible to a researcher since they have publicly identified themselves as the parents of lesbians and gays. Obviously, these parents have a different set of priorities and concerns from the parents who have not accepted their children's sexual identities and have not publicly identified themselves as such. Thus the major limitation of the parents' sample is that it does not include interviews with negative parents. Also, families have passed through many different stages of coping and adjustment. Length of time to achieve this also differs between parents. The majority of families represented in the main study had proceeded through what many described as the "full" process of coming to terms with their son's or daughter's sexuality, be it negative or positive. Some believed that they were still

progressing. Others had not yet even began to make the journey from initial negative reactions to some type of acceptance or understanding.

Biernarcki and Waldorf (1981) believe that there may also be a need to verify respondents' accounts to increase their validity. Because a snowball sample is generated within circles of people who are familiar with each other, it is possible that some people may discuss the experiences of others as well as themselves. This can be an additional source of verification in related cases. Since most of the empirical data came from individual respondents talking about and interpreting their parents' reactions, one could legitimately ask whether they were in fact, recounting their parents' views and experiences correctly. However, an analysis of the interviews conducted with parents and their children did confirm what each other was saying in their interviews. This was the case even when parental interpretations and definitions of the situation differed from their children's perspectives. Obviously, to have interviewed more parents would have allowed me to further confirm this.

Hence, various problems were involved in using snowball sampling to obtain respondents and data. Some of these were methodological. Some resulted from constraints within the research focus. Also, many limitations emanate from the sensitive nature of the research. The type of networks generated heavily influences the sample. As I mentioned, most respondents were active in the lesbian and gay communities as opposed to those who were not. The findings cannot be generalised to the wider lesbian and gay population. However, as Lee (1993) points out, in some instances the use of snowball sampling is the only possibility available to researchers. So, there is a large possibility that the sample will be unrepresentative. Ward Schofield (1996) advocates that for qualitative researchers, generalisability is best thought of as a matter of fit between one's own research and others' research to which one might be interested in applying the conclusions. I believe that this fit is best achieved through the thick, qualitative analysis that I propose to do. Also, disclosure to the family is becoming more common (Weston 1991). It will be possible to look at how my research might be similar to future research on disclosure to one's family. The interview and the questionnaire were tested out in a pilot study. I will now look at the outcomes of the pilot study.

THE PILOT STUDY

The pilot study's main aim was to test the practicality of the interview guide. Four people were interviewed, three gay men, and one lesbian woman, in May and June, 1997. Two were obtained from a young lesbian and gay group (14-25) in Nottingham, by contacting the leader of the group, who then informed other members of the group. The main problem with approaching a young lesbian and gay group was the limit set on ages. Obviously, I could not get in touch with anyone over the age of 25. Another problem concerned the sex of those who attended. In the time that I spent with the group, it appeared that men were the more likely individuals to attend the group. This is also a problem that I have come across with various other groups. Men appear to be the most frequent attenders. Hence, it became more imperative to approach future groups that actually are for lesbians only. Also, there was the problem that those who attend confidential, non-political, local youth groups, are less likely to have disclosed their lesbian or gay identities to their parents.

The interviews, on average, lasted for about two hours. The most significant thing about the pilot study was how it permitted constant change. Nearly every interview was slightly altered to allow for corrections, re-wordings and even completely different questions. The first interviews brought out how little attention the interview guide was giving to the process between initial disclosure and the prevailing conditions. This presented the first problems. I initially found it difficult to devise questions to obtain data about these issues. I decided to begin by asking the respondent whether he or she could remember a brief situation between himself or herself and a parent, that was of significant to them both; and then I gradually expanded on the basis of this, by asking such questions as "What issues did this situation bring up for your parents and yourself?"

Further questions were asked to elicit information on how parents coped or dealt with the process, whether contact was maintained throughout, and whether the individual parent had changed, and why this may be the present case. The theme ended by asking whether the lesbian or gay child and the parent see each other differently now as compared to when the respondent first disclosed his or her sexuality. The process allowed me to focus on the interview guide in a more in-depth manner and allowed me to divide the guide into its component parts, relating to

the themes identified previously.

The pilot study also allowed time and experience to concentrate on the practicalities of conducting research, as well as of focusing on the content of the interview guide. For example, once the theme concerning the process from initial disclosure to prevailing conditions, had been added into the interview guide, it became apparent that the interview guide was too long. I would need to be even more focused and particular about certain aspects of the interview guide, whilst maintaining as much that was relevant to the two themes as was possible. On reflection, I decided to dispense with the part of the guide that dealt with coming out to siblings and relationships with siblings. As Padgett (1998) points out, the process of designing and conducting qualitative research is rarely linear. The changes that occurred as a result of the pilot study allowed me to embark on the main study.

THE MAIN STUDY

The main study began in September, 1997 and ended in July, 1998. In all, I interviewed 21 gay men and 18 lesbians. The total number was 39 interviews. In addition to this, I was able to interview the parents or a parent of 14 lesbian and gay respondents. Four respondents referred me directly to their parents, having been recruited before I interviewed their parent or parents. The other 10 parents were contacted through the national parents' group, Friends and Families of Lesbians and Gays (FLAGG). In all, twenty-two parents were interviewed.

It began by gaining access to other respondents who were passed on to me by a respondent who participated in the initial pilot study. I also began approaching youth groups and social groups who offered friendships and support to lesbians and gays within a specific area. Respondents and their parents came from different parts of the country, London, Sheffield, Birmingham, Manchester, Nottingham, Norwich and Derby.

Changes were made to the interview guide as a result of the main study too. As I have mentioned, during the pilot study, I dispensed with the part that looked at sibling relationships. Concentrating on only parents and their off-spring, rather than siblings, could raise questions as to the feasibility of taking the respondent's perspective. It could be that siblings are very

significant in the disclosure process. However, the main study informed me that parents were the most significant people in the disclosure process. Respondents remained free to mention siblings if they feel it appropriate. And, the fact that the interview now allowed for a rich and detailed perspective on parental relationships will inevitably shed some light on sibling relationships. The main study also demonstrated that the last component of the interview guide was too important to be dispensed with, as it permitted a broader journey beyond familial relationships. It allows a comparison of experiences within the family with other areas of social life and an analysis of a whole series of inter-related identities. Also, after some thought, I also decided to dispense with the question that asked whether the respondent could give a brief situation between the parent and the individual. This was because I realised that the first set of questions before this one was actually reminding the respondent of such situations anyway.

The main study also shed some light on various other issues concerning the employment of qualitative methods to research. Fielding (1993) asserts that interviews permit respondents to employ their own definitions of the world, allowing the respondent to raise considerations that the interviewer has not thought of. However, I found that the interaction situation could sometimes be more complex. For example, respondents might pick on and begin to employ the same constructs and definitions as used by myself. Hence, the real or everyday constructs employed by interviewees may be altered. Because the respondent is working with and interpreting the construct in the same way as the interviewer, this may dilute the respondent's everyday interpretation of the word. For example, when I employed the term "outside world" to refer to situations such as work or university, some respondents began employing the term to refer to such situations. Nevertheless, it was sometimes surprising when respondents employed these terms before I had employed them. Also, sometimes, respondents launched into the following interview guide question before I had asked the question. This gave me some indication that the designed interview guide did relate to occurrences in the lives of respondents, which respondents could relate to. This leads me to examine how the data was analysed.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was guided by grounded theory. Strauss and Corbin (1990:23) define grounded theory as "one that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents."

Discovery and confirmation of theory is achieved on the basis of an analysis of the data. Grounded theory does not begin with a theory that must be confirmed or disconfirmed. Instead, whatever emerges will depend upon the findings of the data. Data and theory must fit. Interpretation refers to the interpretation of description that is given by respondents through their language and past biographical experiences. Denzin (1989) argues that interpretation gives meanings to descriptions. Interpretation was achieved through "thick interpretation" (Denzin 1989). Data is analysed through making use of social contexts, interaction and the experiences which respondents talk about. It is ideographic and inductive (Neuman 1994). Focus is on rich description and analysis. It is also rooted in text and meaning. Throughout the data analysis, interpretation struck a balance between what Denzin refers to as "native interpretation" and "observer interpretation". Native interpretation refers to interpretation of individuals' experiences and knowledge in terms of their local knowledge and experiences. Nevertheless, these meanings and experiences can be strengthened and further illuminated by observer interpretation. For example, the interviews generated substantial data categories concerning parental issues arising from disclosure, how parents coped and came to terms with disclosure, and what, if any, influences children had on parental coping. However, by employing observer interpretation, I was able to ascertain the different processes and linkages between each of these categories. For instance, I was able to see that whatever issues and concerns arose for parents as a result of disclosure could significantly influence how they coped with it and whether they came to accept their children's sexual identities. However, I was able to formulate this interpretation out of the meanings and experiences of the respondents. When these two means of interpretation are balanced out, the communication between the researcher and respondents enters into an informative dialogue. The theories of the researcher fit into the imagined or actual meanings and experiences of the respondents (Denzin 1989). I will now proceed to examine the data analysis process in greater depth.

The first twenty of the lesbian and gay respondents' interviews were transcribed verbatim, as were the first six of the parents' interviews. As Fielding (1993) points out, verbatim transcription means that all possible analytical uses of the data are allowed for. Data that may become significant later is not lost. It also helped to guide the initial data analysis. As I transcribed each interview, categories and themes emerged which could be explored in later interviews. The remaining interviews were transcribed selectively once themes and categories

had emerged and I was more aware of them. All interview data was transcribed by myself. Respondents were told before the interview that no other person would be able to listen to recorded interviews. Once the first twenty interviews had been transcribed, I began analysing the transcripts.

Microanalysis

Data analysis began by a microanalysis (Strauss and Corbin 1998). This is the careful examination and interpretation of participants' stories. It begins through line by line analysis (Padgett 1998), examining the interview transcripts and interpreting what words and interpretations mean. Microanalysis allows us to consider a range of possible meanings and stances towards the data as it is allowed to speak. As well as exploring how respondents describe their experiences, it allows us to begin to ask theoretical questions. Strauss and Corbin (1998) define theoretical questions as probing questions that stimulate the discovery of properties, dimensions, conditions and consequences of such things as who, what, where, how and why. It also permits us to make provisional hypotheses, for instance, statements about how categories may relate. This quote from a lesbian demonstrates the process of microanalysis. She is describing disclosure of her sexuality to her mother and her feelings about it.

> I was sixteen. I agonised over it for weeks because I was going out with this boy, because I fancied his mum. I agonised and agonised over it for weeks. I was in a real state about it. When I was at work, I was automatically thinking, "Oh my God, oh my God, everybody can tell". I got really hyper sensitive about people speaking to me. In the end I just couldn't bear it any longer. It had been going on for a couple of months and I could not bear hiding it inside me any longer. So I told her. I said, "I'm really sorry. I think I might be gay". And she just sort of looked at me. "What are you talking about?" I said, "I think I might fancy women". She said, "Oh that's only a phase. It's just because you are really close to Rose", which was the boy's mother. That was it. That was the end of the discussion. For a long time after that, it was like, "No, no, it's just a phase you're going through. It's just a phase you are going through. It's because you are really close to Rose". Rose was out as a bisexual woman and It wasn't until I

started going out with her son that I actually realised this which lead me up to telling mum about it. But I didn't talk to Rose about it because part of the problem was that I fancied her, so I couldn't tell her how I felt and that I might be gay. It was difficult. It was really hard only having mum to talk to about it. I'd not been able to talk to my mum for years. It was just like, "Yeah, right, it's a phase". I'll ignore it and it will go away.

Words and interpretations are important here. A lesbian describes how "going out" with a boy confused her as regards her sexual orientation. She says "sorry" before disclosure to her mother. This indicates that at the time, she perceived being a lesbian as something to apologise for. The fact that her mother perceives her same-sex attractions as a phase gives us some preliminary indication that she is dismissive as regards disclosure. As she elaborates, "It was really, really hard only having mum to talk about it". This indicates her isolation during early disclosure. She begins to deny her same-sex attraction to Rose as she comes to use her mother's dismissive attitude to cope with the isolation and confusion. Careful microanalysis meant that this lesbian could be categorised as someone who received a negative reaction from a parent and reacted negatively herself to same-sex attractions by denying it. Line by line analysis (Padgett 1998) on initial transcripts also further allowed me to begin exploring the meanings of coming out which could then be looked for in transcripts. The extent and accuracy of these meanings could be confirmed by exploring all the transcripts and doing a comparative analysis to see if others defined coming out similarly or whether definitions were different. This lead to some preliminary categories concerning the meanings of coming out, which are elaborated on in Chapter 3. Microanalysis allowed me to ask further theoretical questions concerning initial processes and variations and how possible actions and events might link. I will now examine the process of open and axial coding in the data analysis process.

Open and Axial Coding

Strauss and Corbin (1998) view open coding as uncovering, naming and developing further concepts by opening up the text and exposing the thoughts, ideas and meanings within. Data is broken down into discrete parts, closely examined and compared for similarities and differences. Events objects and interactions found to be conceptually similar or related in

meaning could later be grouped under more abstract concepts referred to as categories (Marshall and Robson 1999). We begin to conceptualise by labelling the phenomenon under investigation into abstract representations of an event or object that is seen as significant. Similar events and occurrences are grouped together as a class of similar objects. Ranges of potential meanings contained within words are developed in terms of their properties and dimensions. These meanings and concepts, properties and dimensions are classified and grouped under a more abstract concept based on the ability to explain what is happening. Explanation begins on a higher level. For example, when respondents talked about initial disclosure to their parents, the data provided many concepts and meanings. These are some of the quotes from lesbians and gays.

> Suddenly I was confronting them (her parents). This what I actually am. I think mum was horrified because she was hoping for years that I'd just grow up and get married and everything would be fine.
>
> Mum wanted to know more AIDS, so she could tell me the right things to do. She wanted to know what I was doing.
>
> Mum was worried about my safety and AIDS. She wanted to know I wasn't at risk. Then she wasn't going to be a grandparent by me.
>
> Mum was upset that I wouldn't have children. It's an issue for me too. I think about it more now that I'm over thirty.

Two parents who were interviewed together asserted,

> My husband and I didn't know these things. We were frightened of Clause 28. This was being made public around the time of the formation of the parents' group.

> All sorts of things go through your mind. We had a daughter older than our son. And I was thinking about the family name. I was only the only one who was going to carry on the family name (by having a son). I wasn't going to do that anymore. The family name was going to die and I felt dreadful.

Concepts arise out of the data such as parents' longing for grandchildren, the fear that the family name may not be continued. Fear of AIDS and Clause 28 were also discerned. These concepts and meanings were categorised as properties of a larger category which was labelled issues and concerns which arise for parents and children as a result of disclosure. Data was further analysed to ascertain any variations in dimensions and properties in the category. As Strauss and Corbin (1998) point out, patterns are formed when groups of properties align themselves along various dimensions. I found that two specific types of issues and concerns emerged. Issues and concerns were further grouped into two categories to give them clearer meaning. Concepts such as fear of no grandchildren or marriage for children and the ending of the family name were grouped into "personal issues and concerns". These were issues and concerns, which revolve around personal and familial relationships. Fear of AIDS, Clause 28 and safety were categorised as "issues and concerns which transcend the family". These were concerns and fears, which related to disclosure beyond familial relationships and personal identities.

Open coding was again achieved through line by line analysis of sentences and paragraphs to develop categories by discovering their properties and variations within them. The main ideas emerged and further questions were asked as regards why and what makes these concepts and properties different. All transcripts were analysed and ideas and concepts were written down with a reference containing information on which transcript and page a quote could be found to support the emerging category. Once they had all been recorded, the variations and differences were then transferred on to separate pieces of paper. The categories could then be compared and contrasted more easily since they had all been confined to their own specific pieces of paper. Strauss and Corbin (1998) also refer to axial coding, whereby we explore subcategories. Rather than standing for a particular phenomenon, subcategories answer questions about the phenomenon such as why, what, where and how. Categories are given greater explanatory powers. For example, I sought to discover why the two types of issues

emerged and what the consequences were. By examining the language and statements of the data, I found that personal issues and concerns emerged due to parental worry about the internal stability of the family. They emerge because parents cannot perceive their children beyond familial conventions such as heterosexual marriage. The consequences were that these issues and concerns were more likely to be invisibilised and ignored and could impede a parent's ability to come to terms with a child's sexuality.

Conversely, issues and concerns which transcend the family emerge, as parents perceive their children beyond the internal stability of the family. This influenced misunderstanding due to fear and misinformation, rather than invisibilising the issues involved. Issues and concerns significantly influenced whether parents were categorised as negative or positive. Whilst the data was rich and detailed, allowing for varied degrees of reaction, attitudes and emotion, it was carefully analysed to create clear and distinct categories of negative and positive parents. The two categories of parents emerged on the basis of how they responded to the issues and concerns which they faced initially, their coping processes and their ability to feel comfortable with their children's sexuality. These two categories ensured that they could be compared and their distinctiveness discerned. Despite the careful and structured organisation of categories, the data allows for rich and varied information. As is seen in Chapter 4, a minority of parents did not react with for example, hostility or fear, to disclosure. However, they were still confronted with new information about their children's lives and relationships as a result which could be categorised as negative or positive, depending on how their children and themselves interpreted these experiences. Also, the parents categorised as those who fail to come to terms with their children's sexuality demonstrate different means of coping, adding variety to a structured categorisation. Lastly, I shall examine how the data was analysed for process.

Analysing for Process

Strauss and Corbin (1998) argue that qualitative data analysis explores action and interaction and traces this over time to examine if and how it changes over time or what enables it to remain the same with changes in structural conditions. Analysing process allows us to see further the relationship between different categories, how they change over time in response to context or the situation. Also, action and interaction can determine changes in context and

become part of the conditions influencing the next interaction. The data was analysed to explore changes in interactions and relationships and how they evolved in response to context. Data was analysed for patterns (Wolcott 1994). This involved studying the data and asking questions such as why do parents change their responses to their children's disclosure? What interactions and relationships influence these? How does one change in interaction and context influence another? What are the consequences of these changes? Process is analysed in relation to structure and context. The data was analysed to see how lived experiences and personal narratives of respondents also created contexts, and how these contexts further influenced interaction. Sub-processes can also be explored. These are the specific strategies and actions, which comprises the larger act. For example, data analysis demonstrated that the issues and concerns initially faced by parents could significantly influence how they manage information and cope with disclosure. Coping mechanisms influenced whether and how parents came to terms with their children's sexuality. The coping strategy influenced further interactions between parents and children. I now present a small piece of an interview with two parents to illustrate how changes in contexts and circumstances influence relationships.

> Ben: What did it for me was that we'd (his wife and himself) been going to the group (parents' group) for six to eight months, and it was about September, October time; and each year, the Leicester University gay soc invite the parents to talk to one of their meetings. And the gay group like to listen to their experiences, how they reacted when their sons and daughters came out, because obviously, they're coming to an age when they're considering telling their parents. Elena and Bob (two parents from the Leicester parents group) had got this arranged, and said to us, "Would you like to come along?" We said, "Yeah, anything to help". I was expecting about ten, fifteen, tops, twenty people at this meeting. When we arrived we couldn't move. It was totally full; we had to fight our way to the front to where we were supposed to be. It was that that said to me, "This isn't a small thing. There's all these kids here and all these parents. Like my son, some time, they're going to have to tell them that they are gay. Some whose parents are dead, that I know, have always regretted not telling their parents that they're gay. That's what did it for me. That's when it said to me, We've got to do something about this. This isn't a small issue, as I thought it

was". I thought homosexuality was a very small minority group of people.

Did you want to know more?

Kate: Oh yes.

Ben: After two or three meetings, we sat down and talked about it, and we said, "Look, you think you're worldly. You're in your forties. You think you know everything". We've been around the world a bit and we're fairly broad-minded, and suddenly, we realised just how little we knew about homosexuality. So, we made a conscious effort. We've got to educate ourselves. We've got a gay son, and got to find out as much about it as possible, and how much it involves.

Mother: Certainly, Elena was able to give us a lot of literature which we read; and then it was a case of I've never been much for Channel Four, but they were the ones that were showing the gay programmes. We virtually started watching Channel Four non-stop. There seemed to be such a lot of gay programmes on and so it was a case of taking that all in, discarding what you really thought was irrelevant. I even went as far as watching the joy of gay sex. There were some things when I thought, "Do I really want to know this?" So, I've retained what I think I ought to know, and banished what I don't want to know, which may be a little selective, but it allows me to deal with it. Like Ben says, that first gay soc meeting was a real eye opener.

Ben: Because they were just everyday normal kids.

Kate: You could just look at them and you could see nieces and nephews, so we knew it wasn't peculiar to people like our son.

Ben: The perception of homosexuals was what the media give us. Before, you see it on T.V. You've read it in newspapers and it was always the funny talking, funny walking, limp wristed bloke, or the butch crew-cutted girl. And that's the

image that the media throws at everybody most of the time. But when you're out there, you just realise that they are just normal everyday men and women. If you like, what the media throw at you was a very small percentage of lesbians and gays. It's the wrong image that's being thrown at you all of the time.

Kate: While we were watching a lot of Channel Four, and reading a lot, I try to be a very open person. I'm fairly close to my brothers and sisters. And I didn't like being evasive when they would ask questions, especially at Christmas time when they'd ask whether Dean (the son) and Maggie (his former partner) were going to get married. Just before the Christmas, we had to exchange presents with my brother on the coast. We meet half way. He's got two boys, and I was really concerned because when they come to Leicester, they always stay with us. And if they hear in a round about way that Dean's gay, they might read too much into it, and it could cause problems. But when we met, before Christmas, I did make it my business to let them know Dean was gay. We were dealing with the situation. But we felt that because they always stay with us, if they felt that Dean could be a danger to their boys, and they wanted to stay somewhere else, then that was up to them. Now, my brother will put his head in the sand and they were O.K to our faces. We've had no bad responses from any of the family. We've said, "Look, if there's anything you want to know or ask or read, let us know, and we'll get it for you. If you want to ask Dean about anything, then do ask. Don't sit and worry about it, or let it fester away. Say something and we can address it".

Is this helpful to you?

Kate: It means they haven't got a problem with it.

Ben: We eventually made a decision, that if anybody's got a problem, then it's their problem. The biggest thing was about three years later. We'd done Pride and I was working with the police, and the Mirror rang us up and said we want to an interview about gay parents. We agreed to do it. They came down and they

interviewed us. A couple of months went by and we didn't hear from them, and then one Friday, we got this phonecall saying that we were going to be in next Wednesday's issue, centre page, two sets of parents, one on one side, the other on the other. And then it suddenly occurred to me that my boss reads the newspapers everyday. And, of course, they don't know that I've got a gay son; suddenly I'm finding myself, "I'm going to be out at work, a company with 8000 employees, and I'm very well known among the whole of the company". I thought, "I'm going to have to face this down, face to face. Monday morning, the chief rings. "I have a problem I'd like to discuss with you". I got a lot of support from him. I never had had to discuss it with him before. We discussed it length and said that he thought his own son might be gay.

How did you cope?

Ben: Coping with it in the early days was very difficult because you don't know how people were going to react. You're a bit careful whom you tell. I've had wonderful reactions, and I can honestly say, there's only one bad reaction that I've come across in the whole company yet, who was probably a little wary and he's now retired.

Kate: I can't say it was easy initially because you are facing things and situations that you never even dream would crop up. Most parents have these expectations of their children. Certainly with Dean in the choir at the cathedral, he was entitled to be married there. In my mind, I'd sort of got the wedding planned. I'd got the outfit and I was going to take Ben to the cleaners. We were going to have the biggest and poshest sort of doo. Certainly, that meant flying out the window. It wasn't one of the immediate things that I thought about. It was really quite painful, learning how selfish I'd been because these were my expectations, not Dean's. Parents in general, quite unwittingly, have these expectations for their children without having the right to. I found that quite a painful lesson to learn. And I mean, I think it's made me a better person. I don't take things for granted now or not as much anyway. I can't say how long it was before I was totally

happy with it, but I think one of the catalysts was the gay soc meeting, when you suddenly realise that there are a lot of people who are gay and lesbian out there.

And then it was a case of I think I got angry then at the way society as a whole deals with the homosexual issue. What right do the papers have to tell me that my son is a pervert? I mean, he's not. He's just being himself. Why should he not have equal rights to other children? To me a boy and a girl are still children, whether they are gay or straight. But if they are straight children, they're not breaking the law; my son, up until the age of eighteen, would have broken the law, if he'd had sex. I got really quite angry and I felt that they are not being treated fairly. The straight ones really ought to be made aware and have some understanding that people go from one end of the spectrum from another. When it comes to sex, there are certainly many grey areas, and there's nothing wrong with feelings and affections if you're a girl for a woman, as well as for a fellow for another man. I've never got my head fully around bisexuality, but then I've never had to face it as such. When people think of gay, they automatically think of sex. That's wrong because sex in anybody's life is only a small portion.

This narrative is representative of many parents who experienced a similar process of learning to come to terms with their children's sexuality. They speak of the initial parents' meetings, of exploring the lesbian and gay communities and the impact of these, which encouraged them to learn more about their children and the lesbian and gay communities. These parents describe what they did next to begin understanding their son by reading literature from the parents' group and watching television programmes dealing with lesbians and gays. They searched beyond the family for advice. It allowed them to decide what they initially might not be able to cope with. This influenced their learning further. It encouraged the learning process further by exploring how broader areas of social life impinged on their son's identity. Each situation provides further conditions for future interaction in coming to terms with a lesbian or gay identity. As we shall see in Chapters 4 and 5, coping situations create further contexts for interaction with children depending on the type of coping a parent employs.

SUMMARY

Chapter 2 has explored the methodology, methods of investigation to be used in the present research and data analysis. It concludes that etiological and structural accounts of lesbians and gays and their families are too deterministic and limit the scope of the research. Rather, I shall employ a qualitative approach based in grounded theory to analyse the social construction of identities and relationships between lesbians and gays and their immediate families. The methods by which the data was collected and analysed were also examined. The findings generated from this approach will be presented in Chapters 3, 4 and 5.

CHAPTER 3

COMING OUT

INTRODUCTION

This chapter begins with the presentation of some biographical details about the respondents. It then deals with the first part of the internal theme of which I outlined in Chapter 1. It looks at how lesbians and gays came out to themselves. Then it proceeds to look at how they disclosed to parents and what coming out meant to them. This chapter covers some familiar grounds of previous research into the coming out process.

RESPONDENTS' BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

Table 1

Sex of Respondents

Sex	Number	Percentage
Male	21	53.8
Female	18	46.2

The sample contains three more gay men than lesbians. This is the result of recruiting from lesbian and gay social groups where gay men were more likely to attend than lesbians. This also seems to be the case in other samples (e.g., Boxer, Cook and Herdt 1991). Lesbians tend to be less visible than gay men in the lesbian and gay communities (Jeffreys 1994). This is because gay men are economically better off than lesbian women are. Hence, gay men are more likely to be visible and have more political clout in the social and leisure aspects of the lesbian and gay communities than women are. The situation in the lesbian and gay communities is a reflection of the wider society where men tend to have more access to society's economic and political resources. In order to try and resolve the discrepancy, I began to recruit from groups,

which were exclusively for lesbians. However, many of these groups were small. Also, many groups for lesbians tend to be for young lesbians. Young people were less likely to have come out to parents and were more likely to be living with them. However, some attendants at the groups were able to refer other respondents to the study.

Table 2

Race of Respondents

Ethnicity	**Number**	**Percentage**
White	36	92.5
Non-White	3	2.5

As is the case with past research, lesbians and gays from other ethnic groups are under represented. Icard (1986) suggests that ethnic minorities are less likely to find support from or feel comfortable in the lesbian and gay communities. This is the result of racism and the exclusion of ethnic identities in the lesbian and gay communities (Loiacano 1989; Ridge et al. 1999). Hence, white respondents are more likely to be recruited. Initial white respondents are also more likely to refer other white people during the snowballing procedure. This is because these respondents are less likely to know of others from ethnic groups.

Table 3

Age of Respondents

Age	Number	Percentage
15-18	5	12.8
19-21	3	7.6
22-25	4	10.2
26-29	3	7.6
30-33	8	20.9
34-40	10	25.6
41+	6	15.3

In this sample, respondents above the age of thirty appear to be more represented than in other samples. For example, Savin-Williams (1989a), Newman and Muzzonigro (1993) and Ben-Ari (1995) tended to recruit young people between the ages of fourteen and twenty-five for their research into coming out to parents. This is usually because researchers have chosen to look specifically at young people coming out. This is because it is assumed that young people are more likely to still be in recent contact with parents.

Table 4

Educational Attainment of Respondents

Qualification	Number	Percentage
GSE or "O" Levels	7	17.9
A" Levels	7	17.9
First degree	12	31.1
Postgraduate degree	6	15.3
Others	6	15.3
No education	1	2.5

Table 5

Employment Status of Respondents

Employment	Number	Percentage
In employment	27	69.2
Not in employment	12	30.8

The sample appears to contain more respondents in employment and with higher levels of education than in other samples such as Savin-Williams (1989b) and Ben-Ari (1995). This is because previous research into coming out to the family has concentrated on young respondents between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five. For instance, in Savin-William's (1989b) sample, seventy-eight per cent of respondents were at college when they were recruited. Young people who are usually still in college or university are less likely to have obtained degrees and higher degrees. However, those over twenty-five are more likely to have achieved a higher level of

educational attainment. The average salary of respondents in this research is £10, 631. Salaries ranged from £5, 000 to £22, 000.

Table 6

Geographical Location of Respondents

Geographical location	Number	Percentage
Sheffield	7	17.9
Manchester	2	5.1
Leicester	5	13.0
Derby	2	5.1
London	7	17.9
Nottingham	11	28.5
Loughborough	1	2.5
Norwich	1	2.5
Birmingham	1	2.5
Lincoln	1	2.5
Mansfield	1	2.5

As is the case with previous research, the sample tends to be biased towards urban areas. All respondents at the time of interview were living in towns or cities. Since the lesbian and gay groups which I contacted initially are situated in the larger cities, then it is most likely that respondents will be living in cities. However, during the interview, respondents were able to inform me about many other past experiences in their lives. Some, for example, were raised and came out in non-urban areas or small towns. Whilst respondents were living in urban areas during the time of interview, this did not entail that they had spent their whole lives living in urban areas.

Overall, the sample tends to have similar characteristics to other samples of, for instance, Savin-Williams (1989b), Boxer, Cook and Herdt (1991), Newman and Muzzonigro (1993) and Ben-Ari (1995). For example, lesbians and ethnic minorities are under represented. Also, most respondents tend to reside in urban areas. However, respondents above the age of twenty-five are more represented in this sample. This increases the likelihood that respondents will have attained higher educational qualifications and makes it more likely that respondents will be in employment.

As the biographical information has informed us as to the similarities of the respondents, I now present brief biographical narratives of three respondents to demonstrate the diversity of respondents within the research. I shall begin with Joan, then present James and end with a look at Jason. The names of these people are pseudonyms as they were all guaranteed anonymity.

Joan Blake is a lesbian woman who lives in Sheffield with her partner, Salli. She is in her early thirties, describing herself as white. Joan works in a hospital and her current annual salary is £20,000. Joan and Salli have one child, a boy, who was conceived through artificial insemination. Joan reports that she first had sexual attractions to other women in her mid teens. Whilst she could not decide definitely how she would describe her mother's initial reaction to disclosure, she firmly believes that her father reacted negatively. Joan's mother is now dead and she has very little contact with her father who is still negative. Joan believes that her "existing" family is more important to her than her blood family.

James Hull is a forty-four year old single man living in a house share in Nottingham. James describes himself as white and is currently unemployed. However, he was previously an English teacher in Japan and also lived in France, teaching English for three years. On return from France, James joined his parents' antiques business for a while. He specifically says that he first experienced sexual attractions to other men at the age of 10. His mother remains negative about and distant from his gay lifestyle. Whilst he enjoys gay social groups, he is more ambivalent as regards the commercial scene. He does not believe that it serves his needs as he as a result of his age and academic interests. Nevertheless, he still continues to see a need for it so as to meet other people and to be able to socialise. James is on the committee of a local gay men's social group.

Jason Seid is an eighteen-year-old and refers to himself as Afro-European. He currently works part time and attends a local lesbian and gay youth group in Hackney, London. He hopes for a career in the health service. Jason first experienced sexual attraction to other men between the ages of fifteen and twenty. Jason originally came out at school by writing an English essay about lesbians and gays at school, which his mother later found. Jason is currently living with his two parents, his biological mother and his adoptive father who is of European origin. He is hoping to move out of the parental home once he has found regular full time employment. Jason also prefers social groups to the commercial scene, although he has met numerous partners in lesbian and gay pubs.

COMING OUT TO ONESELF

Now that we have looked at the respondents' biographical data, this section will explore their experiences of coming out to themselves. When speaking about coming out to themselves, respondents first gave accounts about how they experienced initial reactions to their sexual attraction to members of the same sex. The first category comprises those who experienced it negatively. For instance, they reported being scared and confused or found it isolating and difficult. These respondents then explained the strategies which they employed to deal with their negative experiences. The second category comprises those who experienced coming out to themselves as positive. They felt that coming out to themselves presented them with no problems. For example, one respondent simply perceived it as "natural".

Some respondents in the first category reported feeling scared and confused because they could not understand why they felt different from others. Andrew, a chemist in his thirties from Manchester, reported how he experienced his initial attractions to other men.

> At times, there was guilt attached to being this strange person who knew who he was supposed to be, but who couldn't tell anybody else. You felt different, but originally, you weren't sure of what the difference was.

The main problem for Andrew was not knowing or being able to explain his initial reactions to same-sex attraction. Lewis (1984) and Martin and Hetrick (1988) assert that this is because society and the process of socialisation do not allow a positive vocabulary to define

feelings for members of the same sex. Eliason (1996b) explains that the dominant heterosexual discourses obscure any positive lesbian category that a woman can apply to herself. Hence, it is difficult to understand or articulate the difference felt from others. It is difficult to immediately understand or define oneself as lesbian or gay (Troiden 1989).

Similarly, Sean, an unemployed teenager from London, also found that he had had the same experience of not being able to understand and articulate why he felt scared and could not understand how he felt.

> When I first found out I was gay, it was scary at first because of the way that I was brought up. I didn't know what lesbian, gay or bisexual was. So when I started thinking that I'm not attracted to women, it was like, "What's wrong with me?" I didn't think I could turn around and say to my mum that I'm not attracted to women.

Many described their initial reactions to being lesbian or gay as difficult, frustrating, terrifying and isolating. Most of these respondents felt like this because they were aware of social stereotypes that stigmatised lesbians and gays. This compounded a sense of difference and fear. As Goffman (1963) notes, society equips individuals with the capacity to recognise that other people view certain characteristics as "wrong" or "abnormal", through a hierarchical categorisation process, leading to feelings of shame and guilt, as illustrated by the narratives below.

> I guess it was fairly isolating in some respects. It felt like it was a negative label rather than a positive one. It wasn't something which I was going to openly admit to because it was wrong. There was isolation because I wasn't able to communicate it to anyone. (Gwen, a student from Leicester, in her thirties)

> When I first realised that I was gay, I felt very much an outcast. You'd always been lead to believe that anybody who was like that was a pervert. "Gay" wasn't a word you'd use at the time. You just knew that you were homosexual. You keep it totally secret because you are scared of rejection and that you will become an outcast. (Denzil, a fifty year old airport worker from London)

> It was pretty dreadful really. I can remember the first time I first used the word "gay" about myself. I was quite upset because it was not something that I wanted. I'd been fantasising about having sex with men before that. But it suddenly clicked that I am gay and that this isn't going to go away. It felt very difficult. I was very upset. Initially, I was not hoping to be discovered and to try and find some amicable lesbian and enter into a marriage of convenience and just ignore the whole thing for the rest of my life. (Terry a health worker in his twenties from Nottingham)

These respondents are isolated and frightened since they initially have an awareness that lesbian and gay sexual behaviour is not socially validated. Social identity is never unilateral (Jenkins 1996). To assert it and feel comfortable with it can depend on how it is perceived by others.

However, the second category comprised those respondents who initially reacted positively when they came out to themselves. They found it easy or even exciting. Don, a chiropodist in his forties, from Nottingham, experienced coming out as positive as he saw his sexual attractions to other men as natural.

> When I was in my teens, I always knew that I was gay. I was very open even though I lived in a village. It seemed one of the most natural things in the world for me to be gay. I assumed that everyone accepted it. It wasn't until I was a lot older that I realised that not everyone accepted it as easily as I did.

Anna Maria who works in a sports shop in Sheffield, commented

> I think it slowly dawned on me that I was a lesbian and that I didn't have to do anything else when I was at university. In that respect, it was fairly easy because I was surrounded by people I'd made friends with. Suddenly I realised that coming out to myself as a lesbian made me a lot happier. Being a lesbian, making my mind up and meeting new people took over.

Those respondents who reacted positively when they realised that they were lesbian or gay and came out to themselves had never come across social stereotypes when they were growing up. Some had had parents who were neutral towards lesbians and gays during a respondent's childhood. Some respondents had had parents who had been reticent concerning lesbians and gays. Respondents therefore rarely saw lesbians and gays depicted in a negative or positive light. Whereas those respondents who lacked a vocabulary to articulate their feelings of difference felt isolated as a result, respondents who were positive experienced it in this way because they could not see the difference in the first instance. However, as they became more socially aware, as they entered adulthood, they became more aware that lesbians and gays could be stigmatised in society.

Denial and Exploration

Those respondents in the first category, who believed that coming out to themselves was experienced as negative reported progressing through a process of attempting to manage and cope with, for example, fear, confusion and anxiety. "Denial" was used initially. However, this frequently leads to "exploration".

Some respondents simply denied their attractions to members of the same sex. By denying such sexual feelings, many respondents believed that such feelings would disappear. Hodgkinson and Stewart (1991), in their discussion of coping with stressful situations, such as trauma, see denial as repression of reality. Its main function is to protect individuals from experiencing distress. Dean, an English teacher from Leicester, in his thirties, was able to deny such feelings to himself by dismissing attraction to members of the same sex as an inconvenience.

> It was very difficult. I've always been a rational person and I think I perceived it as an inconvenience, rather than anything else. So it was never a great personal anguish that I thought was a problem. I can remember being a teenager and knowing, but also dismissing it so that I could just get on with my life. I never really dwelt upon it because I knew that if I did, it would probably cause problems. The thing about sexuality in British society is that it is perceived as pretty private. So you can keep it well and truly hidden as long as it is absolutely

necessary. You don't have to face any questions until it is absolutely necessary. I just put it to the back of my mind that it just didn't enter my head to do anything about it.

However, these respondents soon began to realise that their feelings for members of the same sex were not going to disappear. During this realisation, personal denial faded as they began to see their same-sex feelings as genuine and some perceived it as harmless. They began exploring feelings for members of the same sex by, for example, coming out to friends and seeking out the lesbian and gay communities. Dating same-sex partners, disclosing to heterosexual friends and going to lesbian and gay pubs and social groups were most likely to begin making respondents feel more comfortable with their sexuality. Troiden (1989) argues that positive contact with other lesbians and gays is likely to facilitate the construction of a positive lesbian or gay identity. Finding same-sex partners and attending lesbian and gay social groups gave them more opportunities and access to language and groups to help them articulate feelings of difference which they had previously felt. Lesbians and gays are more likely to begin to see similarities with other lesbians and gays (Troiden 1989). A social identity is created through identification with the wider group (Deschamps and Devos 1998). As Tajfel (1972) asserts, a social identity is developed as individuals become emotionally and socially attached to a given group. Turner (1975) advocates that identification with a social group and development of a social identity is the best means of achieving a positive self-evaluation.

It was difficult. I didn't know that being gay was O.K with anyone. It's not nice knowing that you are different from everyone else. I met people in gay relationships and I saw that they were normal. They lived normally. If they could do it, so could I. We knew two gay men and people made remarks about them. But seeing normal people made me feel better. I went to gay pubs and realised it wasn't just me. (Alex, who is an interpreter from Birmingham)

As Snow and Anderson (1987) assert, a more positive identity is "embraced" as a result. Lesbian and gay respondents began to confirm an attachment to a lesbian or gay identity. Sandstrom (1994) and Karp (1994) also note that support groups, in this case, lesbian and gay social groups, can offer alternative and new definitions and vocabularies in order to assist embracement.

As respondents began to make more of a commitment (Troiden 1989) to a lesbian or gay identity, some experienced distress at not being able to disclose to parents. Fear of negative reactions and lack of acceptance and understanding from parents tended to disrupt the coming out process.

> Suddenly I realised that coming out to myself as being a lesbian made me a lot happier. It was a shame that I could not share it with my family. I felt that it was something really important that was happening to me and I wished that I could have been free and honest with them about what was going on. Really my family took a back seat. I realised that my parents would never really understand me. (Anna Maria, who works in a sport shop in Sheffield)

To summarise, respondents gave two accounts of their initial reactions when they first discovered that they were lesbian or gay. Some experienced these reactions as negative, for example, with fear and confusion. This was a result of an inability to articulate the difference from others that they felt or because they were aware of social stereotypes towards lesbians and gays. These findings are consistent with the work of Lewis (1984), Martin and Hetrick (1988) and Eliason (1996a). These respondents underwent a process of managing and coping with these feelings. Initially they employed denial. However, denial is mitigated as they come to see that their feelings for members of the same sex are not going to disappear. During this, they begin an exploration of their sexuality by, for example, exploring the lesbian and gay communities. However, some respondents experienced their initial reactions to their sexuality and coming out as positive. This was as a result of not initially being aware of stereotypes concerning lesbians and gays during their childhood and early teen years.

COMING OUT TO PARENTS: HOW?

Before coming out to their parents, most respondents who had developed positive lesbian or gay identities, and were, for instance, dating partners or were involved in the lesbian and gay communities, used a redirection strategy to hide their lesbian and gay identities from their parents. This is where a respondent endeavoured to redirect his or her family's attention from any signs that there might be a lesbian or gay person within the immediate family. Redirection was attained through ignoring possible questions as to whether a respondent had an opposite sex

partner, through to getting married in order to hide his or her identity. Redirection is part of "impression management" (Goffman 1963). This is where an individual sends specific representations concerning their identities to others, with the intent of influencing their reception. Similarly, Harre (1983) argues that social being is contingent upon the presentation of the self in public and on the roles an individual plays. Nevertheless, the presentation of the public self is influenced by the everyday context that an individual finds him or herself in. Harre distinguishes between "social being" and "personal being". The personal being is a sense of who we feel we are. The social being is the specific roles that we present to people. These two beings can often be different. It is possible that we can present ourselves in public without feeling that this presentation is genuinely what we are. Goffman (1963) argues that misrepresentation and expressive control are all part of this impression management. The respondent aims to continue to blend in with the family. A redirection strategy reinforces sameness between the respondent and the family. This protected both the respondent and members of the family. The respondent was able to conceal his or her gay or lesbian identity from the family. He or she had embraced a gay or lesbian identity but chose to hide any signs of attachment to it (Goffman 1963). But as Goffman (1963) also notes, the "normal" identities of family members are also unthreatened when a stigmatised identity is concealed from them. The public image of a group can remain different from the personal identities of its members (Jenkins 1996).

> It was easy. It was safe. It was causing no problems. But it was redirecting my parents away from questions or whatever, or just smiling innocently at stuff like, "Who is your next girlfriend?" I thought that some day, they will find out, but it doesn't have to be today. (Jason, who is 18 years old and attends a lesbian and gay youth group in London)

Goffman (1963) and Herman (1993) refer to "disidentifiers". These are attributes used by the stigmatised to contradict the stigmatised identity conferred on them. Joan, who lives with her partner and son in Sheffield, explained how she employed a "disidentifier", that of marrying a man as part of redirection.

It was like living a double existence, literally dressed in the sensible coats and cardigans, feeling as if I was in someone else's life that wasn't really me. I'd go to my parents' home and be the dutiful daughter. Then I'd go home and grab my baggy jeans, my boots and T-shirt, and I'd rip all that shit off that I didn't like to wear. I was always expected to be feminine. If I didn't wear such things, I'd get earache from start to finish. "You've got such a pretty figure. Why have you got trousers on?" So for the quietest life possible, I got married because mummy and daddy approved. But I was married. I could risk going home in jeans and trainers and shirts. I was married so it did not matter.

However, redirection for respondents was only short term. Redirection soon became exhausted due to increased comfortability with sexuality. When asked how they came out to their parents, respondents reported two main ways. The first was "coming out directly", the second, "coming out symbolically. However, some respondents were "forced out of the closet".

Coming Out Directly

The majority of respondents disclosed their sexuality directly to their parents in the physical presence of parents. Disclosure to parents directly entailed that a respondent had developed and negotiated a positive gay or lesbian identity.

I decided that it was time and I went around and asked them to sit down and that I had something to tell them. I used the words, "I've always shared everything in my life, but there's something I've been holding back." Dad said, "I think we know." But you need to say it. When I said, "I'm gay", I almost felt this noise, boom, going through the sound barriers. The weight lifted. Life would never be the same again. (Scott, 41 year old retail worker from Leicester)

I came out to them at the same time. That was when I was forty-five. I'd come out in nearly every other quarter of my life. I felt it was becoming an unbearable burden. I asked them to come upstairs in a private room. I broke it to them. (Denzil, an airport worker, in his forties, from London)

> We were walking back from the shops. It just felt like the right moment. I'd been planning it ever since. Mum insisted that I went to the shops with her. It felt like there was just me and her and it felt like a really good time to tell her. We were walking and I was really nervous. I was tripping up all over the place. I was getting really clumsy. We were just talking about general stuff. Then I got on to being gay in general, saying I'd been talking to a gay friend of mine, how it was and just bringing up the subject. Then I just said, "There's something I want to tell you." And it really went on from there. (Jane, a former president of a university lesbian, gay and bisexual society)

Jenkins (1996) asserts that gender and familial identities are primary identities, that is they are deeply rooted due to the socialisation process. They are less resilient to change. Richardson (1996) argues that heterosexuality is deeply entrenched within our personal identities. However, coming out is the final admission that redirection is only short term. Heterosexual conventions of marriage, courtship and children cannot be fulfilled or lived up to. Coming out puts an end to deceit. Individuals begin to redefine their personal identities throughout the life process (Jenkins 1996).

Coming Out Symbolically

Coming out through means of indirect, symbolic gestures involved trying to put a lesbian or gay identity across to a parent without explicitly saying it. It is showing it rather than saying it. There follows a hope that the parent involved may work it out for himself or herself. Again, this was indication that the respondent was comfortable with his or her sexuality and had some involvement with the lesbian and gay scene and communities beforehand. However, respondents were unsure as to what their parents' reactions might be. Individuals are also more likely to disclose in this way when they felt that they were not very close to the particular parent and when openness was not a characteristic of family relations. Symbolic means in these cases involved such things as a congratulations on coming out card or The Pink Paper.

Cultural artefacts such as lesbian and gay newspapers and articles often deal with issues beyond the individual. By showing these to parents, the individual is illustrating to a parent how his or her sexuality connects to other parts life. It is a means of giving a parent a fuller picture,

whilst not explicitly disclosing sexuality. It indicates that others know and are involved. It can also permit a parent to think things over before directly confronting a child.

Dean, an English teacher from Leicester, showed a "congratulations on coming out" card, given to him by his former girlfriend, as a means of coming out to his parents. His mother, Kate, described the night.

> He gave me a tiny little card, and it was from Rita, his girlfriend. And it said, "Congratulations on coming out." So I looked at him and said, "I'm sorry but I don't know what it means. You'll have to tell me." He said, "I'm gay." My head just sort of exploded. We ended up with our arms around each other, the three of us, in a heap on the floor, all of us crying. It was very emotional at the time.

Joan, a hospital worker in her thirties, told me how she never told her father, but "showed" him.

> Me and Salli went to my brother-in-law's fortieth birthday party. She was sitting on my knee, nibbling my ear. When the stripper came on, my eyes were nearly on the floor. I was more than a little obvious. It was a bit underhand, but I knew that at a family party, he wouldn't embarrass himself as to go absolutely mad. It was obvious that everybody at that party, but my father, knew about it. People started saying to him, "How long has Joan had a girlfriend?" He was saying, "Don't be bloody stupid. My daughter's not gay." He still couldn't get it. Eventually, he went to my mother. "You know that Salli? She's not just Joan's friend, is she?" "No love", my mother said. He said, "She's a bloody queer, isn't she." "Yes love", she said. Explosion.

Coming out is concerned with the presentation of self (Goffman 1969). Individuals aim to control the reactions of others towards their personal identities. Individuals also aim to control the signals about themselves which they send to others (Jenkins 1996).

Forced Out of the Closet

A minority of respondents had been forced out of the closet, usually because one of their parents had discovered, for instance, a letter or a magazine. Most respondents in this situation described them as "less than ideal situations". Parents have been unexpectedly confronted with something that gives them information, which perhaps informs them of more than they would otherwise want to know. For example, letters and magazines are more likely to contain references to love, relationships and sexual behaviour. Those respondents that directly disclosed to their parents could at least control part of the situation by remaining silent on such issues or could continue redirecting any questions that surface. Respondents who had been forced out of the closet were denied any control over redirecting any signs that they were lesbian or gay from their families or any opportunities to remain silent on the issue. Daniel, an information technology worker from Nottingham, who lives with his parents, described how his father had picked up on his unfamiliar behaviour on this particular day, that of getting up early for a hospital appointment.

> He asked me whether this was because I was going to work. I said that I had a hospital appointment. I said that it was private. That evening, he wouldn't let the subject drop. I couldn't think of a convenient lie. I said I'd been for a HIV test. That was a shock. He asked, "Have you been shagging the birds?" I said, "No." He asked, "Have you been doing drugs?" I said, "No." He thought about it with a horrifying look on his face. He asked, "Have you been with men?" And I just nodded. He automatically assumed I was HIV positive and gay at the same time. It was less than idealistic circumstances because I wasn't ready to come out to him.

To summarise, respondents reported two main ways in which they disclosed their sexuality to their parents. The first category was where respondents would come out directly to parents, usually in the physical presence of parents. The second category was where respondents came out symbolically. However, some respondents had been forced to disclose their sexuality.

THE MEANINGS OF COMING OUT

When asked what coming out to parents meant to them, respondents reported openness and an end to pretense, assertion of their personal identities and relief. Most respondents believed that being open to their parents about their sexuality meant an end to pretence. Coming out is a means of reconnecting oneself with the family once again. However, it is a more honest approach compared to the strategy of redirection used to maintain closeness within the family.

Many respondents felt that they were living double lives. They felt they were dividing themselves between a world where they could be authentic and a world in which they were pretending. Goffman (1961) refers to this as "role segregation". An individual conceals certain aspects of themselves from other individuals in specific contexts. This can facilitate "audience segregation". Those who figure in one person's identity may not figure in another. The individual then has to balance contradictory qualities. This distance and contradiction was compounded where individuals had disclosed to others such as friends. As the former became larger, the latter became smaller and more intense. The more an individual discloses outside of the family, the more his or her family are squeezed out. Coming out to the family, regardless of reactions, allowed the information shared in the outside world to be shared within the family. As a result, a balance was struck between these two worlds.

For many respondents, coming out also meant reasserting themselves and being honest about the possible courses of their lives. It meant the assertion of their personal identities. From now on, respondents refused to feel anymore guilt or anxiety. They were not going to let negative reactions affect them. Being lesbian or gay was just a normal part of life. Respondents did not require approval for their sexual identities. For example, two respondents felt that coming out to their parents was a means of explaining that they would not be conforming to religious conventions of getting married, being a housewife or a male breadwinner in the traditional sense. It is about asserting the life that one wants to lead by emphasising difference. Jenkins (1996) refers to this as "boundary maintenance". Personal identity is asserted from others within a group, in this case, the family. Personal identity is asserted through interaction across the boundary with others. Respondents begin to ascribe new aspects of their identities to themselves rather than adhering to those ascribed by and through the family. However, an emphasis on difference still manages to reconnect the individual to the rest of the family. All

involved come to know of the individual's sexuality and all can attempt to alter communication and relationships. For example, some respondents explained that coming out informed each family member where they stood in relation to the lesbian or gay individual. Mothers would stop asking their daughters about boyfriends. Fathers now knew that their sons were not interested in, for instance, football or girlfriends. Telling the truth about the different course of one's life is a means of gaining "control", being able to "talk about life normally", and telling a parent who one really was. Difference is asserted, but distance is palliated by all knowing the truth. Jenkins (1996) refers to "institutionalised" identities that derive from groups and organisations and bestow similar identities on all of its members. The family is an example. However, individuals can "struggle" within these groups to reassert different personal identities that are different from the institutionalised identity (Hacking 1990). Self-identity involves an internal-external dialectic.

Coming out also meant relief. Respondents felt relief because they were able to convey to parents, not just their sexual orientation, but that they were comfortable with it and had told other people beyond the family. Sharing it confirmed their comfortability. For some, relief came from being able to share something which remained hidden and oppressive. Whatever, the parental reaction, relief came from being freed of an oppressive secret. Families become accessories in presenting to and elaborating on personal identities (Jenkins 1996). Nicola, who lives with her partner and sons in Sheffield remarked,

> It was just not so oppressive, just not holding it inside anymore, being able to confide in somebody. I didn't want judgement. I didn't want the while world to collapse around me. I didn't want all flowers to grow out of the wilderness. I just wanted to let it go. Otherwise, I would have burst.

Daphne, a checkout assistant from Nottingham asserted,

> It was a big relief. You are always hiding. You cannot say, "I am going out with my girlfriend." I didn't want to be cast out. Coming out gave me back my confidence. My family knows.

Adrian, who came out to his parents at the same time, remarked,

> It meant that I felt I had come out. It was the last stage in coming out. I feel nothing is impossible anymore. It was relief. Things could move forward. It was like waiting for a bit exam and passing it.

SUMMARY

This chapter has looked at part of the internal theme as outlined in Chapter 1. It has looked at how respondents came out to themselves. It has also looked at how the respondents came out to their immediate families and the meanings which they gave to this process. Chapter 4 will proceed to analyse the post-coming out experience. It will focus on parents' initial reactions and the initial issues and concerns which confront parents and children as a result. It will also analyse identity formation and relationships from disclosure to the present. Finally, it will examine the influence of families on lesbian and gay identities.

CHAPTER 4

THE POST COMING OUT EXPERIENCE

INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 4, I will explore the rest of the internal theme, for instance, parents' initial reactions to disclosure and the initial issues and concerns that arise for parents and children as a result. I will then proceed to analyse relationships between the respondents and their parents from initial disclosure to the present and consider what respondents gained from coming out. Finally, I will examine the influences of the immediate family on the respondents' sexual identities.

THE FIRST REACTIONS OF PARENTS

The research seems to confirm what many others looking at parental reactions have found. Most parents invariably react negatively, although there are different degrees of negative reactions (Weinberg 1972; Collins and Zimmerman 1983; Devine 1984; Robinson et al. 1989; Strommen 1989). Among the most negative were anger, shock, despair, shame and, in one case, hate.

> When he first found out, he never talked to me for about a month. And then it started to get like little digs here and there, like "queer", "faggot." Then it just came to the stage where he was doing it all the time. And when I turned around to him and said, "Don't do it no more. I don't like it", it was, "If you don't like it, get out." So, I left. (Sean, an unemployed teenager from London)

Scott's mother, Elena, who is a secretary, told me her first reactions.

> We spent the whole night crying. It was so bad the next day. My face was such a mess that I couldn't even go to work. All I could think of was the fact that I had a gay son, a poofter, as people called them, and that was dreadful. There's nothing there. There's nothing I can see. I felt ashamed. I felt awful for what the neighbours would think. I was frightened to go to work. At work, people thought that people like my son should be put down. So, in the end, I never mentioned

> Scott's name. It was as if he'd disappeared. He was invisible. It was as if he'd gone, died.

Elena's reaction demonstrates "boundary ambiguity" (Boss 1980). This is where individuals become uncertain as to their personal identities and those of others. Richardson (1996) asserts that heterosexuality is an integral aspect of personal identities. Personal identities are constructed around and perceived through heterosexuality. For example, straights are perceived to be normal. Lesbians and gays are perceived as "abnormal". Hegemonic heterosexuality (VanEvery 1996) is rooted in our personal identities and relationships and is seen as normal, natural and appropriate. Parents feel guilt, horror and shame as a result of a realisation that their children no longer identify as heterosexual (Bernstein 1990). They may question whether they were effective parents, too. This can result in guilt and self-blame. Carole, an English and Dance teacher from London, in her thirties, asserted,

> My mother clutched the kitchen sink, started to cry and became totally hysterical. She said, "Oh God, I've been waiting all my life for your white wedding and the grandchildren. Where have I gone wrong? I've done my best." The fact that I was adopted gave her a get out clause because she thought I'd had a defective gene from my birth mother.

Other parents felt a mixture of hurt, fear, anguish, guilt, isolation, worry and disbelief. Caplan (1982) argues that the family is a source of mainstream ideology. It reflects the ideologies and attitudes of the wider society. If the mainstream is homophobic or ambivalent towards lesbians and gays, it is likely that family units will reflect the dominant ideologies. As Van Every (1996) states, heterosexuality has no essential characteristics, but it is constructed as hegemonic. Richardson (1996) refers to an "institutionalised" heterosexuality. It is assumed that heterosexuality is the fundamental foundation of all social relationships and identities. It is the basis of an effective functioning society. Hence familial relationships are constructed around heterosexuality to the exclusion of lesbian and gay identities. This is compounded since society does not define how stressful feelings of anguish and hurt should be managed and reduced (McCubbin and McCubbin 1993). Patricia, another parent, who is a cleaner, spoke of her main reaction, that of fear. However, her fears were not so much to do with her daughter being a lesbian as such, but that she herself had experienced prejudice of a different kind as a child.

I realised that it had touched a little button in me. The fact that she was saying she was a lesbian was not a problem. We've had lesbians that have worked with us at the clinic. I was worried about her being on the receiving end of prejudice because I received a lot of prejudice as a child, because I was born in India. Although I was of English parents, everyone thought of me and my mother as wogs. We were badly treated. I was saying, "I have no problem with you being a lesbian, but I'm concerned about prejudice."

Ben, Dean's father, who is a businessman from Leicester, talked of his anguish and isolation.

You've got all this information and knowledge in your brain. You want to scream it out. I found that I lost all my concentration. I couldn't do anything at work without thinking about it. I couldn't read the paper without thinking about it. And I just wanted to tell someone about it.

Worry tended to be the result of two factors. The first was the concern about the future course of a child's life. The second main worry concerned what a parent was going to tell others. Parents tended to emphasise fear and worry that the possible lack of a family in the conventional sense would lead to loneliness and insularity.

The things that go through your mind are that he'll never have anyone to look after him, no children. He'll miss out on so much. It was traumatic. I tried not to think about it. (Beattie, mother of Mick, who now helps others who want to come out)

I felt so sad for him. I felt sorry that things weren't going to materialise for him that came to us. We always wanted the same for our children, plus a bit more. (Dulcie from Manchester, mother of Andrew, involved with the Church)

The second main cause for concern derived from worry about what parents were going to tell others. All the past talk of, for instance, weddings, would have to be silenced. But no adequate explanation could be offered for this.

> It was what everybody was going to think. We'd got it into our minds that there was going to be this big wedding. There was going to be three people to give her away. We all had high hopes. How was I going to tell anyone? If someone asked whether Gwen was married, I used to say, "I don't think she'll get married." I didn't say why. (Valerie, mother of Gwen, who does voluntary work)

Other reactions ranged from uncertainty, indifference, dismissiveness, retrospection, inadequacy, to calm, joyousness and immediate acceptance.

> Well, it was mostly a kind of reaction that I never saw because he'd been expecting it, I think. He didn't exactly ignore it. But his reaction was, "Well, that's how you are, and I'm going to go off and watch the rugby and never talk about it as an issue at all." I don't think he was very comfortable with it. (Bella, a part time librarian from Sheffield)

Some parents became retrospective about the disclosures. They delved into the past to endeavour to make sense of the disclosure. Much of this retrospection was achieved through the dominant perceptions of gender and sexuality. As Jeffreys (1996) explains, heterosexuality is constructed through the idea of gender differences. Men and woman assume different gender characteristics in order to form the heterosexual couple. Men are assumed to be masculine in character and appearance. Women are "othered" in that they must appear the opposite in character and appearance. Any deviation from femininity is taken to mean that a woman must be a lesbian and uninterested in men. Anna Maria, a lesbian in her thirties from Sheffield, told me about how her mother had been shocked and continued.

> I remember her saying, "Well, you never did wear dresses. You were always a bit of a tomboy. I should have known really."

Kate, mother of Dean, who is now involved in parents' groups, explained,

> I examined. I went over, in quite minute detail, the whole of his upbringing. Who had interfered with him to make him gay? I looked at every man who had been in his life, schoolteachers, choirmasters, anybody who could have had any

influence upon him.

Another mother, Rose, who is involved with lesbian and gay youth groups, explained that her first reaction had been one of inadequacy. She could not see how she could begin to deal with it.

> When he told me, it was a shock and it wasn't. It was a shock in that I felt that something had been confirmed to me. On the other hand I felt as if I'd been given a key to unlock a box. Now I had the key to what's been going on, things that I couldn't understand. The overpowering feeling was that I felt inadequate. As a teacher, I'd worked with children. He was my fourth child. I felt I knew most of the answers. There weren't many things that could have been thrown at me. I felt terribly inadequate. I wasn't appalled. I felt ignorant. I felt I should be doing something, but I didn't know what. It was, "Where do we go from here?"

However, some respondents, though a minority, reported receiving positive responses.

> She was happy. We hugged and cried. She's relieved. It was a weight off her mind too. We are closer now. (Daphne, works in Boots, the chemist)

> She was very calm, quite clinical. So, there wasn't any kind of immediate repercussions. That was it, no discussions, just a case of, here's the truth and we'll both carry on kind of thing. (Jason, who attends a lesbian and gay youth group in Hackney)

> She was very calm. My mother rarely reacts in a very strong way. She was very matter of fact about it. Mum was really quite positive. She was very welcoming. (Bella, who is a part time librarian in her thirties)

Cindy described her father's reaction as simply "not negative". When I asked her father, Edward, a computer operator, why this was, he replied,

> She was young and it wasn't as if she'd suddenly announced that she'd got this lesbian lover down the road that she was seeing after school. It was more a question of inclinations. She said that she felt she was a lesbian, that it was likely that she was. She wasn't presenting us with a relationship. She was telling us more about feelings more than relationships.

Given such a wide variation of reactions, what is it that influences or helps determine whether parental reactions are more likely to be either positive or negative? Factors such as stereotypes about lesbians and gays, and parental backgrounds, for example, a parent's religion, occupation and where they live, are more likely to have a negative influence.

Stereotypes are more likely to come from outside of the family and bear upon relationships within the family. For example, stereotypes about lesbians and gays usually come to a parent from the outside and mainstream society. Parents come to identify with stereotypes long before their sons and daughters come out to them. Stereotypes exist and are primarily drawn upon from society as a whole. For example, cultural stereotypes of gay men portray them as "swishy", "effeminate", "limp wristed", "emotional", and wearing "garish clothes". Lesbians are depicted as "butch", "drab", and wear "short hair" (Plasek and Allard 1984; Lance 1987). Many sons and daughters did not have to demonstrate any stereotypical characteristics for their parents to react negatively. Parents assumed that their son or daughter must be effeminate or butch because they were gay or lesbian. Parents had assumed the cultural stereotypes largely from outside of the family, before their children were born and when their children were growing up. As Goffman (1963) notes, not only will "normals" expect individuals within a specific stigmatised category to support particular norms; they will also expect them to realise them.

Parental backgrounds also had an influence upon negative reactions. These backgrounds, and the attitudes that came with them, had been formed long before a son or daughter disclosed his or her sexuality to a parent. Josephine, a mother, mentioned a religious background that had caused hurt, fear and misunderstanding.

I was totally ignorant. I was brought up a strict Catholic, not really knowing much about sexuality until I was married, let alone homosexuality.

"Occupation" was mentioned to have a significant effect on a negative parental reaction. Some respondents cited those traditional, male dominated occupations, such as the police.

He didn't like it because he is a police cook. It's difficult if people know that his son is gay. (Paul, an unemployed teenager from Nottingham)

It was never having to think about it. It was prejudice. He'd been in the police for fifty years. (Matthew, 32, works for a Dutch publishing company)

He used to be a police constable. I can remember, as a kid, him coming home, covered in blood and snot, talking about how many poofs they'd locked up. He regularly would have come home having raided queer bars and locked them all up. (Joan, who is a hospital worker and lives with her partner)

Where a family lived and its environment was mentioned by some respondents to have induced a negative response, too. Those parents who lived in small communities with their appeared to be no lesbian or gay pubs or people were more likely to show negative reactions.

She doesn't know many gay people. The area that we live in is quite backwards. It's very working class. It was a mining village. Then it all closed down. There are a lot of close family networks. She only knows about the area we live in. (Freddie, 18, from Mansfield, on a college course)

However some parents were more likely to have known or had lesbian and gay friends in their personal lives. Hence, they might have had more chance to have modified any stereotypical views that they had of lesbian and gay people. These induced more positive reactions. The relationship between the parent and the child is less likely to be affected. Also, parents who did not react negatively did not believe that disclosure should change their relationships with their children. Parents saw no reasons to disturb the present relationship that had been built up in the past. Jason, a London teenager, told me why his immediate father had reacted positively.

> There was a connection between me and John, my father, but it wasn't inherent in a sense. It was a connection that had been built up over time. I wasn't born his son, but became his son over time. I've always seen him as a guide more than anything. If I need to know about power tools, I'll go to him. If I want to confess my most intimate feelings, I'll go to mum. My father sees I have these (gay) tendencies, and he does not have to pretend that they are not there to fulfil his sense of pride as a good parent.

Madge, who experienced relief at her father's accepting attitude, despite his religious conviction, explained that her relationship with her father had always been one of keeping reticent about sexuality. Sex, be it heterosexual or lesbian and gay, was a private matter to the point of irrelevance. When she did disclose, this "asexual relationship", as she called it, took the pressure off. Despite her father's dismissive attitude and her mother's calm attitude, Bella, believed that her family had always cultivated tolerant relationships between each other.

> I feel that both of them in their different ways, encouraged me to be whoever I wanted to be. Even before I came out, he lent me this book to read with a lesbian character.

Why are such things as, for example, stereotypes and where a family lives more likely to produce negative reactions? Stereotypes and negative cultural depictions of lesbians and gays are produced and maintained from the outside and mainstream society. They are usually always present and are all that informs parents about lesbians and gays (Strommen 1990). Hence, sons and daughters can easily be slotted into these mainstream stereotypes where no other means of understanding them is possible. Stereotypes are also more likely to be a reminder to parents that an outside world exists beyond the family. This world can subject them to stigma as well as their sons and daughters. As Strommen (1990) points out, the son or daughter's identity is negated. This can lead to physical abuse of and alienation from other family members (Jones 1978; Martin and Hetrick 1988).

Stereotypes are also less likely to be immediately modified. They are far less easy to alter or modify when they are presented on television and used by other people in the parents'

immediate vicinities of work and friends. Also, parents' beliefs and attitudes, if heavily influenced by factors such as occupation and where they live, are more likely to be an ingrained property of their whole life, from childhood to adulthood. To try to dispel stereotypical attitudes to improve the relationship with a son or daughter also entails dispelling much of what is familiar to a parent.

Parents who had a less negative reaction were less likely to subscribe to stereotypes or negative cultural influences. They were more likely to have known other lesbians and gays. Parents were more likely to have put them to one side and not seen any reason why present relationships, as they exist, should be disturbed. Parents try to define responses to disclosure by resisting outside information and assistance (Devine 1984). Definitions and responses are sorted out through a focus on the existing relationships; for example, as has been mentioned, Madge's parents had never made an issue of sexuality in their relationship with her. Hence her parents did not take issue with her immediately when she disclosed.

Nevertheless, even when parents do react positively as a result of dispelling stereotypes, disappointment can still occur. As Strommen (1990) indicates, the family's internal value structure is likely to influence reactions. Values may not be directly linked to stereotypes. But a family that puts emphasis on the value of, for instance, marriage, may cause a negative response, even if parents originally reacted positively to disclosure. Even when parents do dispel stereotypes, many parents have a desire for their children to be similar to them, to replicate their lives. Being gay or lesbian is not seen as a means of accomplishing this.

The Effects of Parental Reactions on Lesbians and Gays

Negative parental reactions were likely to have three different effects upon an individual. Firstly, there were negative parental reactions that produced a negative effect on individuals. Secondly, there were negative reactions that had a positive effect. Lastly, there were reactions that produced no significant effect on individuals. Negative parental reactions that produced a negative effect on the individual applied to the majority of respondents. Many respondents reported that negative parental reactions made them feel "hurt", "reticent", "unsupported", "depressed", "angry", "distressed", "shocked", "confused", "distant", "rejected", "tense", "lonely", "guilty" and "wanting approval". As Jenkins (1996) asserts, social identity is always

contingent upon the means by which others respond to it.

> It's a horrible experience. I wouldn't want to go through it again. (Carole, English and Dance teacher from London)

> I got very depressed. I had counselling for about four years. I felt insecure. (Freddie, 18 year old on a college course in Mansfield)

> I was angry and upset. He said things about gays, that it is unnatural. (Paul, who is unemployed and lives in Nottingham)

Secondly, there were negative parental reactions that produced a positive effect. Negative responses are more likely to strengthen the individual, giving them determination, hope, and relief that at least someone knows. It is not the negative reaction the individual receives, but the actual fact of having disclosed. Disclosure itself can bring positive personal benefits to an individual whatever the consequences of the initial negative parental reaction. Savin-Williams (1990) argues that parental reactions significantly affect a child's self-esteem. If reactions are negative, self-esteem will be low. However, respondents could gain higher self-esteem when their personal identities are asserted through boundary maintenance (Jenkins 1996). The assertion of personal identity provided relief to respondents even where reaction was negative. Children become aware that there is now some possibility that parents may be able to work towards acceptance. Honesty is the beginning of acceptance (Ben-Ari 1995). Individuals are confronted by perspectivism (Gergen 1991). A new aspect of a relationship must be negotiated and dealt with. These respondents chose to turn a negative reaction into a positive outlook to aid the development of their positive sexual identities. As Derek, a local authority administrator, asserts,

> I felt terribly guilty at first. One day I was in my room crying. My dad came in and said, "I want you to see what you are doing." And my mum was in the lounge crying. I said, "I'm not doing that." I knew I couldn't change things. There's no way on this earth that I could turn straight. But I couldn't reverse them finding out. So the only way I could see was forward. I couldn't undo what had been. I could concentrate on the crappy times I'd been through and things would

get better.

Finally, in a few cases, negative responses produced no particular or significant effect on an individual due to his or her current relationship with the parent. These relationships had usually been characterised by lack of closeness in the past. If a parent had not mattered much in other parts of a person's life, the individual did not feel he or she needed approval or validation from the parent. This was much easier where the child had developed a positive sexual identity and had other people to validate his or her identity. This is similar to Burnett et al. (1996) who argue that past relationships are important in the coming out process. If past relationships were not emotionally close, it is unlikely that coming out as lesbian or gay will make the relationship any closer. Hence, the effects of parental reactions are different depending on individuals' perceptions of them and how they choose to employ them in then development of their sexual identities. I will now turn to the issues and concerns that arise for parents and children as a result of disclosure.

POST COMING OUT ISSUES AND CONCERNS

Coming out brings about two different issues and concerns for all parents and their children. Generally, two types of issues and concerns arise out of the coming out process. These are personal issues and issues and concerns which transcend the immediate family. These issues and concerns are also referred to as "stressors" (Crosby and Jose 1983; McCubbin and McCubbin 1993).

Personal Issues and Concerns

Personal issues and concerns tend to be confined to identities and relationships within the family. Many parents expressed concern that a lesbian daughter or a gay son would undermine family relations and identities. Slater and Mencher (1991) mention heterosexual rituals, such as engagements and weddings, which families are supposed to have at some time. These rituals validate relationships within families. They also provide a sense of stability, normality and unity to families. Each member of the family knows what to expect, for example, engagement, the wedding, and the birth of the next generation of children. Many parents in this research felt that their child was preventing the family from participating in these rituals of validation. There was

concern that they would not have any children, thereby prohibiting parents from becoming grandparents. Daphne, a forty-year-old check out assistant from Nottingham, reported that she had expressed much sadness over the fact that she was going to deny her mother any grandchildren.

> She's always wanted grand kids. I feel sorry for her. I feel guilty I've denied her the pleasure.

Personal issues and concerns which arise from the coming out process also involved members of the family having to clarify where each person stood in relation to the other. Some respondents wanted to make clear that there were certain family traditions and conventions that they felt they could no longer adhere to. Terry, a health worker, from Nottingham explained how his coming out put him at odds with his family's religious convictions. He could not be comfortable with his gay identity until he had come to terms with the negative views of lesbians and gays held by the Catholic Church. This meant explaining to his family that there were certain tenets of Catholicism that he felt uncomfortable with. His parents had to face up to their son's rejection of what they traditionally adhered to. As Terry put it, "I couldn't accept the sin. I didn't believe in the things my mother could use to comfort herself."

Madge's mother, Enid, who is involved with the Church, explained how Madge's coming out had lead her daughter to discount religious beliefs. This put a distance between mother and daughter as Enid felt hurt as a result. Nevertheless, Enid felt that distance in one aspect of their relationship lead to closeness in another. At least Madge could be honest about the decline in her religious convictions.

> Now she's out, I realise that in her coming out, Madge is accepting that she no longer has a Christian faith. Therefore that's an area I don't talk to her about anymore. Therefore, she is more relaxed because she sees that we're not going to challenge her on this front because it's moved on past that. But that doesn't mean that we don't pass on or share our faith. I will say, "God bless you" on the phone. But I feel that the closeness of the relationship is better because I feel that she feels that she's being honest. Before, she wasn't able to tell us anything because she wasn't quite sure where she was. We were always trying to return her to her

moral and spiritual roots. In a strange way, the mother and daughter relationship is better. (Enid, mother of Madge)

The main concern of Freddie's mother, who is a part-time nursery nurse, was that having a gay son denied her a substantial advisory role in his life. He was also now further apart from the other traditional rituals of heterosexual family life. Her son's coming out had denied her of the means to bring him back into the fold, for example, encouraging him to date local women. These are examples of "boundary ambiguity" (Boss 1980). Family members need to work out their place in the family schema as a result of disclosure.

Families also appraise stressors (McCubbin and McCubbin 1993). In the case of personal issues, they are most likely to be ignored by parents and not confronted. Some parents who had initially reacted negatively could not bring themselves to talk about their concerns or their child's concerns. This was due to parents feeling that they had lost control over their children. They could not understand why their child was "like this". For some parents, it was fear of the unknown that held them back. Denzil, an airport worker, from London, told me that his mother could not bear to talk about any issues connected to his coming out because she found it "repellent".

It was this thing that "O.K, you are gay. You've told us that now. That's your life. Get on and lead it, but do not bring it home."

Whilst personal issues within the immediate family are likely to change relations between parents and their children, they are easier to repress and put aside. This is because such parents cannot understand their children's lives beyond the old traditions. They also cannot understand how children's sexual identities affect them beyond the family, for example, possible discrimination in the outside world or the possibility that they may be in a same-sex partnership with someone. Personal issues which revolve around issues within the immediate family, such as concern over lack of grandchildren or a child's inability to fully live up to heterosexual expectations of, for instance, courtship and marriage, entails that such concerns are kept within the context of the family. Parents can only see their son or daughter's disclosure within the context of how things "should have been" in a "normal" family. There is the lack of understanding and fear of the unknown.

Issues and Concerns which Transcend the Family

However, the second category was issues and concerns that transcend the family to the wider society. These concerns and issues are often more social or even political as opposed to purely personal. AIDS, a child's partner, and the responses and feelings of friends and relations outside of the immediate family are examples of concerns and issues that transcend the immediate family. Clause 28, the parliamentary clause that makes the "promotion" of lesbian and gay issues by local authorities illegal in schools and libraries, is an example of a political issue. Like personal issues, they arise for and between parents and their children.

> The main issue has been about partnership. Before I had a partner, it was, "My son is gay, but he's not having sex." Once they knew about Anthony, it opened doors. Not only is it about being gay. Sex is stronger. It challenges beliefs and images more. It opens another floodgate. "My son is now having sex with a man." That brought up AIDS. It was 1987. AIDS was being talked about constantly. (Scott, 41 year old retail worker from Leicester)

One issue that did concern many parents was their immediate fears for how their children might be treated outside the family. This alerted parents to see the lives of their children beyond that of the family. For one mother, Rose, who now helps run a lesbian and gay youth group, her main problem was that she felt ambivalent towards the lesbian and gay communities. She admitted that she had no personal problems about her son being gay. However, her main concern was her son's relationship to the commercial scene and the gay social groups he was attending. As she explained, it was not her son's gay identity that separated him from her but her inability to understand his gay lifestyle outside the family. However, she recognised there was a need for him to explore the lesbian and gay scene.

> I took him to a lesbian and gay youth group. When he met some older people, I began to have all sorts of fears and doubts, misgivings. On the gay scene, as there is everywhere, there are predatory people. I went through a conflict trying to sort myself out. With straight people, I knew what to expect. When you are bringing up your children, you are aware of the dangers that are around them and guide them. I had no idea how to guide him because I wasn't aware of the

pitfalls. It was a whole new arena. There were issues around where he should go. He was out pubbing and clubbing much earlier than my straight children were. My straight children didn't do that until they were at university. I let him do this, but I felt that I was treading on a knife's edge all the time. I knew with my straight children where to draw the line. For him, I felt this was the only place he could go with other people who were like himself. At home, he was surrounded by people who felt and thought differently. I understood that he needed to be with other people, but then it brought up other issues about where he should go and what time he should stay out to. They were normal teenage difficulties but they were made difficult because I didn't understand where he was going. I had preconceived ideas about the dangers, I didn't know enough to say, "Yes, you can go out, but you must be back for this time."

Issues and concerns that transcend the family are as likely to be as divisive as personal issues and concerns. Parents are likely to feel they do not control the concerns and anxieties they perceive beyond the family. Ellie's mother, Celia's main concern was that her friends would react negatively to her lesbian daughter. She preferred her daughter to conceal information about her lesbianism.

To summarise, two types of issues and concerns arise for and between lesbians and gay men and their parents as a result of disclosure. The first set is personal issues, usually confined to the immediate family. The second entail issues that transcend the immediate family to, for example, the outside world and the lesbian and gay communities. In the case of personal issues, these arise as parents are less likely to see their children beyond the old familial traditions. The concern is with the internal instability within a family which disclosure can facilitate. Parents are more concerned with the preservation of traditional family values. These issues are more likely and easier to be ignored or invisibilised by parents, particularly if the parent cannot come to accept a child's lesbian or gay identity. The division which occurs between parents and their children is most likely to be as a result of parents and children not being able to talk about any issues and concerns which arise.

Issues that transcend the family occur when parents are more likely to connect their children to other areas of social life and individuals outside of the family. This can be

acknowledgement of a same-sex partner or a lesbian or gay community that might exist beyond the family in which a child is involved. These issues and concerns are more likely to make parents want to take the initial steps to try and make sense of these issues and concerns. They are more likely to be able to see the lives of their children beyond the stability and security of heterosexual rituals and expectations such as marriage. Divisions between parents and their children are more the result of lack of understanding due to fear and misinformation, rather than ignoring issues and concerns.

These two types of issues and concerns are important. Those parents who continue to focus on personal issues and concerns are more likely to remain negative and fail to come to terms with their children's sexual identities. Personal issues and concerns are more likely to lead parents to use "primary control" as a means of coping. (Tedeschi and Calhoun 1995). Parents turn only to a limited number of people for support if they turn to anyone. They internalise the stressor and the outcome tends to be negative. These parents never begin addressing any issues and concerns that might transcend the family. Those parents who act upon the issues and concerns which transcend the family and decide they want to know more about these concerns, begin a process of turning to a much wider audience of individuals and groups. They embark upon "secondary control" coping (Tedeschi and Calhoun 1995) whereby they adapt to the stressor. Dealing with the issues and concerns that transcend the family were more likely to make parents surmount anxieties connected to them as well as personal concerns and anxieties. Confronting issues and concerns that transcend the family invariably meant overcoming both sets of concerns.

DEVELOPMENTS FROM DISCLOSURE TO THE PRESENT

Folkman and Lazarus (1991) argue that coping with stress is multidimensional. Individuals cope in different ways depending on the circumstances. The data analysis suggests that whilst all parents are initially confronted with two types of issues and concerns, two categories of parents emerge depending on how they proceed to cope. The first category comprises those parents who continued to focus on personal issues and concerns. They failed to move beyond these and address issues and concerns which transcend the family. This limited whom they turned to for help and support and personal issues and concerns remained salient. These parents were more likely to remain negative towards their children's sexualities. The second category comprised

those parents who decided to act upon issues and concerns which transcend the family and overcame their fears connected to them and any personal issues and concerns. Facing issues and concerns that transcend the family was more likely to encourage parents to turn, for instance, to friends, family, parents' groups and the lesbian and gay communities as the main means of addressing them. They went beyond the limited number of people that the first category approached for help and support. This brought them to acceptance and significantly lessened personal anxieties and concerns. Folkman and Lazarus (1991) define coping as cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage demands which are seen as stressful or exceed an individual's resources. Ashby Wills et al. (1996) in their discussion of family coping, view coping as strategies to confront a challenge, for example, problem-solving and communication with others. I will now expand on this process.

Parents Who Fail to Come to Terms with Their Children's Sexualities

Parents in the first category were more likely to focus on personal issues and concerns as opposed to issues and concerns that transcend the family. They were not external issues that transcend the family. As I mentioned earlier, they are issues that revolve around the disruption to familial conventions. Shame, guilt and misunderstanding make parents less likely to turn to others for help, support and advice. Jason, a teenager from London, explained to me that the safety of the family was the uppermost concern of his mother when he came out. Again, this is an example of how divisive issues and concerns can turn out to be between parents and children. Jason's mother, a housewife, did not want him to tell anyone outside of the immediate family. She was scared of what the possible implications might be for her son and her other children. Jason had established a gay identity separate from the rest of the immediate family. But his mother wanted to maintain harmony and unity and to ensure the family's safety. She could not separate her son's gay lifestyle and identity from the rest of her family because of safety concerns. Public denial was the best means of promoting personal safety.

She didn't want me running around telling people. She didn't particularly want me discussing it in school because I might be treated negatively. There were two instances where I could have done two T.V programmes. Now I was like, Mum let's do this." It was a chance to go into a studio, full of young homophobic people. My mum was slightly different. It was, "Oh shit, he's going on national television, proclaiming his homosexuality, to quite possibly, our whole family, a huge network of friends, and a bunch of N.F bastards who live near us." There's me all for it. "Well I don't care. People are going to find out anyway." She was, "People might find out, but I've got this family to look after."

Parents could only turn to a limited number of people, such as close friends and family, for help and support for three main reasons. First, some parents had spouses and partners who were very negative. They could not consult their spouses and partners for help and support. Secondly, many respondents believed that reticence was already a part of some parents' personalities. Thirdly, some parents were so negative concerning their children's gay or lesbian identities that they did not want anyone else to know, even if they needed someone else's support and back up.

However, in some cases, children took on the main role of giving support and information to parents. Some parents relied on their children answering any questions that a parent had in order to put their minds at rest. At other times, lesbian and gay children would simply, for instance, supply videos and books, dealing with lesbian and gay issues. Where parents and children negotiated learning and change together, most children believed that they were limited in what they could do for their parents. They could only, for example, answer initial questions. They felt that they could not force them to watch videos and read books on lesbian and gay issues. Trying to bridge the gap together could also bring about other problems. As parents and their children became closer, some parents became aware that they were becoming more distant from their partners. Jason, a London teenager, explained to me how he had to prove to his mother that he was happy in order to reassure her that his coming out was not a mistake. Nevertheless, this was made difficult as a result of not having a significant other in his life, to prove to her that he was happy. Not having a partner reinforced his mother's view that gay men were always sexually promiscuous. Sean, an unemployed teenager from London, told me how his mother became more interested in his sex life as compared to before. Sean felt that

this was going too far as he knew his mother would never accept anal intercourse. This caused Sean to withdraw from the process of negotiating change with his mother. Sean's mother, a librarian, began to find herself isolated.

> The more I was telling her, the more she wanted to know. It was like, "No mum, it has to stop about here now because that's all I can tell you." I don't know everything myself. I'm only young myself. I couldn't explain to her the feeling of everything inside you, like the standing up and saying, "There isn't nothing the matter with us."

When parents are limited to whom they can turn to for information and support, they are not as successful in coming to terms with their children's lesbian or gay identities. This is the result of three main reasons. First, if a parent can only turn to a spouse or partner, a close friend or a lesbian son or a gay daughter, they are usually turning to individuals who are limited in their knowledge of lesbian and gay issues. Nevertheless, if, for example, close friends react positively, this can be reassuring to parents, even if it does not fully allow the parent to understand the child. Second, parents cannot be led directly into parents' groups or the lesbian and gay communities if they only have direct access to a limited amount of individuals. They can find no resources and lack the skills to develop skills appropriate to move towards acceptance (Danielson et al. 1993). Thirdly, and most significantly, whilst relationships between parents and their children may change, actual initial reactions and attitudes very often do not change. Parents still felt negative towards a child's lesbian or gay identity. They only change the way they relate to the child.

If reactions remain much the same, how and why do parents cope with this problem? Coping consists of what Erickson (1989) when discussing how families cope with rape, calls "withdrawing". Kovacs and Feinberg (1982) when discussing how families cope with illness define it as "distancing". Parents kept a distance from the areas of their child's lives that are connected to being lesbian or gay. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) assert that this is a form of "emotion-focused" coping. Only internal emotions are dealt with. Many lesbian and gay respondents referred to distancing as "blocking it out". Folkman and Lazarus (1991) define distancing as an individual's efforts to detach him or herself from distress. Instead, relationships are lived out through other areas of a child's life where the lesbian or gay issue is not as salient.

Folkman and Lazarus (1991) who explore emotion and coping, refer to this as "selective attention". Fischer and Brown-Standridge (1989) in their analysis of parent-adolescent conflict and Gibson (1998) in a discussion of stress, assert that individuals avoid any thoughts, feelings and conversations associated with stressful events. It is dysfunctional coping (Crosby and Jose 1983; Patterson and McCubbin 1983). For example, when Bella brought her new house with her partner, it was difficult for her father to actually articulate this.

> I suspect that if he says anything, he'll say, "Bella is buying a house with her friend Babs."

Enid, a vicar's wife, constantly referred to her daughter's partner as her daughter's "best friend."

> If Madge and Meg came to stay here, I would put them in single beds. If my son and his wife, Jack and Rosa came to stay, they would be in a double bed. That's where we talk about discriminating. Within myself, I don't want to enter into the fact that the two of them would share the same bed. It's like if the children had schoolmates to stay. They would have single beds. There's the feeling that I haven't come to terms with, and don't want to yet, that she and Meg are very special friends. I know there's more to it than that. But I'm not going to question it. The most natural thing is single beds.

Jane, a student at Derby University told me,

> He still sees me as his daughter, but not his daughter who is a lesbian. There's distancing, but there's still asking. There's been a couple of times when he went out and brought my partner a birthday card. Mum wrote the card, but he chose it. It's just little things like that. He'll ask me how things are. And with that, I know he means, "How are things with your partner?"

Denzil, an airport worker explained,

> He blocked it out to deal with it. He couldn't think about it or talk about it. After he'd heard from me, he finally couldn't mentally block it out in that he finally couldn't truly believe he didn't know about. But he could still block it out by refusing to discuss the issue. If anyone else talked about it, he'd wonder off to the garden shed.

Jack, a plumber, from Leicester asserted,

> Down at the working men's club, there used to be a gay dancer called George. Dad would say to me, "You've just missed George's dance. That was the only way the gay side came up, by him relating to this dancer. It was a way of coping.

Distancing can also mean that parents apply the conventions of heterosexuality to their children's lesbian and gay lives. For example, some parents desperately wanted their children to settle down in the same monogamous relationships that their other children had attained. Distancing is a process whereby parents can still accept much of their children's lives and maintain a relationship, because the lesbian or gay aspect is ignored. It is rarely ever mentioned or delved into. Nevertheless, there are disadvantages to distancing. The fact that parents express very little about the issue means that it is difficult for a child to predict future changes in parental reactions and attitudes. This makes life more confusing for children than if their parents consistently demonstrated explicitly negative reactions. Lesbian and gay children have to gauge their reticent parents' reactions from, for example, other people and family members. They rely on what might or could be said "about" them as opposed to what is said "to" them. Shotter and Gergen (1994) refer to this as a "sanctioning process". As long as parents maintain distance and children accept this, they are "rewarded" with a stable relationship. This occurs through subtle microprocesses such as parents' silences to determine what they think is appropriate for a stable relationship (Shotter and Gergen 1994). Uncertainty appears to be the biggest disadvantage in distancing. Appearances and reactions are on the surface. Deeper and more accurate feelings, or any potential changes in these feelings, can never be completely grasped. Relations stabilise but come with a high degree of uncertainty for the child. As Gergen and Gergen (1988) assert, the construction of narratives rely on reciprocity in the negotiation of meanings. Identities are

formed through the construction of "supporting roles". When an individual chooses to disrupt the negotiation, interdependent identities and relations are threatened. There is a disruption to the narratives to which the individuals contribute. Also, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) point out that parental distancing remains a form of self-deception for parents.

Parents could also cope, normalise and make relations with their children more positive by accepting that their son or daughter was not going to change. Hence, they had to change the way they acted towards their children, even if they remained negative about the lesbian or gay identity. A special effort is made to normalise relationships for fear of losing a child. Parents must get used to it.

> She realised that it wasn't going to change. Nothing that she was going to say would change the situation. It wasn't going to magically disappear. I wasn't going to go out and marry a man. It was, "Either I change or I lose my daughter." (Tessa, a lesbian and gay youth officer from Nottingham)

> She coped by accepting it. Everybody has their cross to bear. All things are redeemed. God loves sinners. It's love the sinner, but hate the sin. She has a depressive resignation tied up in Catholicism. One is supposed to suffer. But drug-taking homosexuals are at least better than Protestants. (Terry, a health worker, working with lesbians and gays)

The other main way of normalising a relationship was to eventually come to see that a child was happy. This provided some parents with some reassurance, even if they did not like the things that make a son or daughter happy. These strategies demonstrate the complexities of struggling with and negotiating with different identities in the postmodern world. Identities are comprised according to need and context. There are different potential means of confronting changing relations and identities (Weeks 1991; Beck 1992).

However, despite normalised relationships, these parents still wanted as few people to know as possible. Normalised relations did more to hide conflict between parents and children than actually solve conflicts and misunderstanding. Only relations "appear" more positive. Most parents who accepted their son or daughter for fear of losing them, became used to it, or saw that

they were happy, still could not fully accept them. Their attitudes still remained dismissive, negative and non-accepting. Change and normality exist within the coping mechanism. There is no cut off point between the coping mechanism and the state of play within a relationship.

The most negative outcome was when initial reactions remained negative that it blighted every aspect of the parent-child relationship. As a result of this relations between parents and their children virtually broke down, some to the point of non-existence. Families are unable to restore stability and make the necessary changes (McCubbin and McCubbin 1993). Parents cannot alter their initial negative reactions or normalise relationships because being lesbian or gay comes to blight the whole of the child. Aspects of children's lives that are not conventionally associated with sexuality are tarred with the same brush. This is similar to Muller's (1987) hostile recognition relationship where parents remain belligerent. Unlike, the strategy of distancing, there are very few aspects of a child's life where parents can continue to relate to. Neither can parents get used to the idea or even see that their children might be happy in their day to day lives.

Parents who felt like this were most likely to have been prejudiced against other minority groups such as ethnic minorities. Personal issues and concerns which arose out of the disclosure process were also more likely to have been connected to personal and intimate relations between members of the immediate family, such as sexual abuse or why certain members had never been able to relate to each other intimately or personally. Contact between parents and their children was most likely to be intermittent or non-existent. This was the result of the parent's inability to connect to any other part of their child's life or identity. Parents cannot begin to embark on change as a result of rarely being able to see their children as, for example, good parents or workers. Absolute denial and hostility to their children was the initial reaction and remained part of their coping strategies. They could not see beyond the negativity associated with being lesbian or gay. The majority of respondents who fell into this category had also once identified as bisexual, heterosexual and had been married or had sexual relations with men in the past. This tended to confuse parents.

> I wasn't able to make up my mind without realising that I didn't have to. I ended up living with one bloke. She thought that I was going to marry him. Mick was more emotional security for me because I knew he would never leave me. And yeah, I could go off and sleep with other women. I'd come back and tell him and this was fine. Mum never understood that. When I threw him out, that was another admission that I might be a lesbian. (Nicola, an office worker, who lives with her partner and their children)

Parents found it even more difficult to accept their child's lesbian or gay identity when they had once seen them in conventional heterosexual relationships (Muller 1987). They had actually seen this and not merely imagined or assumed that they would one day be married with children.

How Children Manage Their Parents' Coping Processes

Voydanoff (1983) in her discussion of coping with unemployment within the family, asserts that coping strategies themselves can become sources of further stress as others have to adapt to them and their consequences. Beck (1992) argues that as a result of the potential for different interactions and relationships, individuals must find new ways of negotiating and coping with them. Parental coping strategies entailed that children developed two main strategies of coping with parental distance and breakdown in relationships. The first strategy is where respondents limit communication with their parents. The second was where a respondent drew closer to the more positive of the two parents in order to feel less distant from members of the immediate family.

Many respondents actively coped by limiting communication concerning issues about their sexuality with parents. Instead, they concentrated on developing relations with their parents based on other interests and activities, which are not connected to sexuality. They actively perpetuated the parental process of distancing and were able to maintain contact with parents. They agree to participate in the "sanctioning process" (Shotter and Gergen 1994). This was because these respondents could perceive some benefits for themselves if distance was maintained. It was a means of maintaining stability and of ensuring that parents did not become explicitly negative in both attitudes and behaviour. This was seen as a more

important benefit than sharing all parts of their lives with their parents, especially that associated with their sexual identities. Terry, a health worker, from Nottingham, found his father's reticence frustrating, but at least he was reassured that this meant that as long as distance continued, he would not be ostracised from his parents. Jane, who is a student at Derby University, participated in the process of distancing, as she knew that it meant not having to divulge information about her sex life to her parents. She knew that they would find this embarrassing. These respondents were also more likely to either be living with their parents or living away, but still in regular contact. Frequent physical contact with parents made distancing more important. However, some coped by limiting communication with their parents completely or much as possible.

These were those respondents whose parents were explicitly negative about their sexuality or where communication had broken down completely. Respondents focused their attention on their friends and lesbian and gay families that they had formed, for instance, partners and children, for help and support. They were also more likely to see their parents as the losers in a distanced relationship. Some parents could not wholeheartedly accept their children's same-sex relationships and the children that resulted from these partnerships. Lesbians and gays in this situation believed that their parents were missing out on having a family. They perceived themselves as stronger because they could not rely on their parents for emotional support and help. They believed that they should not waste time trying to bring their parents to a positive attitude concerning their sexual identities. They felt that they should not have to invest time and effort trying to educate and change parents when they had other concerns to cope with. Most of these respondents did not live with either of their parents. They were more likely to be both physically and verbally distant from parents.

> Mum tries to forget that I'm a lesbian. She doesn't even mention it. She'll talk about Joan and ask how she is. But she never acknowledges that it's a lesbian relationship. But now I've got to the point where I don't care. I've stopped bothering to ask her permission. I just tell her, "Me and Joan are a family. You accept all of us or you lose all of us."I don't let her play the game because I don't join in. (Salli, a dental assistant, who lives with her partner and their children)

I'm not going to compromise my identity to make other people's lives easier because that makes mine harder. My imperative is to make my life as comfortable as possible. If that makes other people unhappy, that's their problem. They have to deal with it. It's not my place. I've made all the adjustments. They have to make theirs. I'm not prepared to make anymore, not for my parents. I don't have the energy. I've got my own family to put my energy into. (Nicola, an office worker from Sheffield)

The second means of coping with distant parents was to invest more time and emotional capacity in the one parent who was most accepting. A respondent could feel less distant from the family as a whole as long as positive contact was maintained with at least one other member of the family. Paolucci et al. (1977) refer to this as a "coalition" in which two family members cooperate to achieve certain outcomes. By maintaining positive contact with one parent, there was more chance that the negative parent might be able to be influenced by this positive contact. The positive parent could be an intermediary. Knowing that there is one positive parent gave these respondents a feeling that at least they were backed up and supported by that parent when the other parent was hostile and unwilling to compromise. Sean, an unemployed teenager from London, was in the situation of having a mother who was positive and a father who was negative.

I think dad has kept in contact with me through my mum. But I think that deep down, he's regretting what he said, but he's made his bed and he's got to lay in it for a little bit longer.

Also, respondents were likely to feel more supported and less isolated if their siblings and their sibling's partners were supportive. Respondents were able to use this situation as a means of showing the least supportive members of their families that they were the isolated individuals, not the lesbian and gay respondents. Many respondents felt that they were closer to their brothers and sisters as a result of coming out.

My brother's attitude was to shrug his shoulder and say, "Well, it's like having blue eyes." It wasn't an issue. That challenged mum. (Tessa, lesbian and gay project officer in her thirties)

My sister looks on having a lesbian sister as a kind of street cred. (Ellie, a former member of Lesbian Avengers in her thirties)

My sister was concerned at first. But now she wants to tell the whole world that she's got a gay brother. I think my dad's ashamed of me. He feels his masculinity is threatened. I don't see why my being gay has anything to do with it. If he doesn't come to terms with it, it might introduce conflict into the family because my mum really wants to accept it. And there's my sister who has accepted it. Yet he's not willing to try and change. (Daniel, information technology worker from Nottingham)

Some respondents who had parents who were less accepting and distant believed that as a result, parent and child saw each other differently. Some believed that their parents saw them differently because they had established some independence from their immediate families. Whilst parents could not acknowledge a child's lesbian and gay identity, children could still demonstrate that they were making a life for themselves, even if parents disapproved of how and who they were doing it with. Tessa, a youth worker, believed that her mother and herself saw each other differently because they had two separate lives. Tessa saw her mother as different because she thought, that at first, her mother would be more accepting when she first came out. Her mother saw her differently because she could not influence her daughter anymore.

There's that disappointment that my mother hasn't really accepted me. But she's shifted. It's further than I would have thought. It was a shock for her to see I'm not going to be influenced by her. I had an agenda. I remember when she first saw the earring. There was this look of horror. "Oh my God, you don't have to do that as well, you know." Since then she's never mentioned it because the earring has stayed. I was astonished at how quick she'd worked it out, that it means I'm gay. I didn't think she'd spot it. (Tessa, a youth worker from Nottingham)

Alex, an interpreter, told me that despite his father's refusal to fully acknowledge his gay identity, he believed that his father saw him differently.

He sees me differently because of the struggles of the last years. Seeing me do well in my job has made him proud.

Those respondents who did believe that parent and child did not see each other differently was because they knew that their parents had always had a negative view of lesbians and gays. Children felt that they could do nothing to influence or change the attitude. There was no means of trying to change them.

She doesn't have a cat in hells chance of understanding because she wouldn't try to understand it. (Don, a chiropodist in his forties)

However, another reason why parents and children did not come to see each other differently was because children participated in the distancing process with their parents. Because children did not want to upset or destabilise parents, they were denied a means of trying to change their parents

I didn't see dad differently. He was always there for me. I couldn't view him differently. There would have been boundaries. I was the same person with the same job. Being gay was something that he didn't make an issue with me. I didn't make it an issue with him. It was something that never got discussed. I didn't push it. (Mick, a travel agency firm manager, in his thirties)

Parents Who Did Come to Terms with Their Children's Sexualities

The second category of parents are also initially faced with bereavement, personal issues and issues and concerns which transcend the family. Many parents also initially respond by attempting to distance themselves from their children. However, having been bereaved, they also began focusing on issues and concerns that transcend the family as well as personal issues and concerns. Issues and concerns, which transcend the family can be such things as AIDS, prejudice, political and social issues such as Clause 28 and a son's or daughter's same-sex partner. These are more likely to make parents feel that they can come to understand and overcome these concerns. They are stressors (McCubbin and McCubbin 1993) which are appraised as demands that need to be overcome to lessen the stressor. The main way of

achieving this is through obtaining as much information about their children as they can in order to understand their children's lesbian and gay lives. If the parents themselves want to understand their lesbian and gay daughters and sons, they must try and turn their backs on all the previous expectations they had for them. They must search for new understandings and information in areas connected to their son and daughters' lives. Kovacs and Feinberg (1982) in their discussion of individuals coping with their children's illness, refer to this as "mastering" the situation. A replacement must be found by reaching out to others and locations which can be found beyond the immediate family as well as inside it. This is the beginning of coping, the first effort at "confronting" the issue (Folkman and Lazarus 1991).

The main means of coping and coming to terms with initial negative reactions was for parents to turn to friends, supportive family members and other parents with lesbian and gay children for help and support. It meant going beyond the few individuals to whom parents in the first category turned. Hodgkinson and Stewart (1991) in their discussion of trauma in general perceive this as the first "search for understanding". Parents who shared parental anxieties and concerns with other parents always found advantages in turning to other parents with lesbian and gay children for support. First, parents' groups offer "informational support" (Ashby Wills et al. 1996) to other parents concerning their lesbian or gay child. Wills (1985) when discussing social support and Ganster and Victor (1988) in their discussion of social support and mental and physical health, assert that this decreased stress and prevented more distress. They can also inform parents as to how the parents in the group initially felt about their children's disclosures and how they overcame their concerns and anxieties. Ashby Wills et al. (1996) in their discussions around coping, refer to this as "emotional support". Second, parents' groups constantly inform the parents attending about their progress in trying to understand their lesbian and gay children.

McCubbin and McCubbin (1993) refer to such support as "appraisal support". Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) when looking at coping with trauma, call this "vicarious learning". Such support also affirms progress (Danielson et al. 1993). Parents attending the groups saw that there were other parents whom they could measure their own progress against. Parents' groups established some sort of target for parents to aim at. A parent never feels alone as he or she is surrounded by other parents who have previously made the adjustment and continue to maintain a positive outlook. Gottlieb (1983) when discussing social support strategies, advocate that self-

esteem is enhanced and individuals obtain a sense of control. As Voydanoff (1983) asserts, with reference to family members coping with the unemployment of other members, social support becomes a significant resource in coping with stressors. Friends and parents groups become the main source for parents to construct a new personal biography for themselves by changing the old views of their children.

Socially prescribed biographies are declining. Relationships and biographies are now open to personal construction. (Beck 1992; Beck Gernsheim 1998). Relationships that used to be closed to negotiation and decision making are increasing. Parents' groups are a phenomenon of the postmodern world which assist in this process. Individuals learn about other individuals' identities and relationships and attempt to adapt to the differences (Beck 1992). As Simon (1996) asserts, in postmodern societies there are less shared meanings. It is no longer possible to rely on traditional means of maintaining relationships and understanding others. Rather, our ability to understand and recognise others' identities is to reorganise the self and how we relate to each other.

> We got into it. The turning point was other parents. When we went to the parents' group, it took some time. I came out feeling two stone lighter. In that room, suddenly I was talking about my gay son, as opposed to pretending that he was my boy who hadn't got a girlfriend at the moment, feeling that to be a secret. I was open. Everybody else was talking about their gay kids. It became more normal, ordinary. (Michelle, mother of Matthew, who is now involved in parents' groups)

One parent, Millie, mother of Alex, explained to me that the main reason for her reliance on the parents' group was because her husband could not talk about their gay son. Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) when discussing trauma, point out that this brings extra stress for the isolated spouse. Coping can be more effective when family members endeavour to overcome the problem together. Many parents explained that they could not rely on their sons and daughters to give them the necessary help and support in coming to terms with a lesbian or gay identity. This was usually because lesbian daughters and gay sons were themselves dealing with uncertainty in their lives. Children were coping with their own feelings of uneasiness, confusion and indecision. Children did not feel that they were the right people or that they had the ability to be

the main support to parents. Hence, influence and support from children was very limited. However, most respondents did believe that they could assist their parents with minimal help. If they felt that they were not the right people at the time to offer the main support, they did feel that they could act as intermediaries and go betweens. Wertlieb et al. (1976) who looked at families coping with children's illness, refer to this as a form of "intra-familial" social support. However, gay sons and lesbian daughters were the most help to their parents when their parents could see that they were happy with their lives. This provided parents with reassurance. It permitted them to see that what they were learning from their own friends and the parent's groups could be seen in everyday life.

> Apart from mum seeing that I was happy, I wasn't called upon to change her perceptions and understanding. We didn't talk about that. (Ellie, former Lesbian Avenger in her thirties)

Most respondents were happy for their parents to go out and explore, for example, the parents' groups. Some believed that the parents' groups were the best means of coping for their parents. Just as respondents had had to turn to other lesbians and gays before coming out for help and support, they believed that other parents would be more helpful to their parents. If parents were using parents' groups, friends and partners for support and advice, respondents could carry on with their lives as normal. Parental reliance on parents' groups was also seen by respondents as being useful since respondents were not solely the ones that had to go over old ground that could be hurtful or upsetting. This freed respondents to continue their lives as best they could. This reinforced the help that they were giving to their parents, that of reassurance that they were happy with their lives. Most respondents did want to be separate from the coping processes of their parents. They wanted to be intermediaries and answer questions from their parents when this was necessary. Respondents wanted their parents to learn about the isolation and anxiety of the negative pre-disclosure period without them having to relive it in too much detail. They also saw that a parent's own peer group would be more useful to them. They believed that they did not always know enough themselves to help their parents. This was true of respondents who did not feel that they had enough experience of, for example, same-sex relationships and the lesbian and gay communities. As Dean, a teacher, from Leicester reported,

> I couldn't influence my parents. I just thought I had to be as prepared as I can. You sort of have as many answers as you can. I just knew that the only way for them to carry it forwards was for them to learn like I had. When I went to the gay coffee bar, I hadn't got a clue. I hadn't been on the scene in either Newcastle or Leicester. I didn't know anything about it. I didn't even know the local gay pub.

Dean continued.

> I probably wasn't the right person to talk to. I was wrapped up in what I was going through at the time. I thought that if I wanted help with being gay, I rang gay switchboard. I thought the best thing they could do was speak to another parent that they have things in common with. It was a case of, "I'm here if you want to talk to me, but these people and their experiences are probably more relevant.

Some parents found that as they became more positive, they found that they became able to begin helping other parents that were coming to the group. The more parents they saw, the more normal having a lesbian or gay child became. If a parent can begin to tell other parents to try and accept their children's sexual identities, then this became proof that they had accepted or had begun to accept their son or daughter's sexual identities.

Another means of coping with and coming to terms with a child's lesbian or gay identity was for a parent to get to know other lesbians and gays and the lesbian and gay communities. This allowed parents to meet "real" lesbian and gay people so as to be able to disconfirm the previous stereotypes and negative attitudes that they held prior to that. This began when parents felt comfortable with the results of attending parents' groups. Learning to overcome stereotypes about lesbians and gays in the parents' group could be further enhanced when they were faced with real situations in which they could meet and observe other lesbians and gays. Exploring the lesbian and gay communities can also be reassuring to parents in that they can observe that their children belong somewhere else where they appear comfortable. This is particularly helpful given that a son or daughter's life outside of the conventional heterosexual family is usually a worry for many parents. Parents who meet a son or daughter's partner can also be reassured. McCubbin and McCubbin (1993) in their discussion of coping with stress in the family, see this

as acquiring additional resources not available within the family.

> Now they sit there and kiss each other and it doesn't mean anything to me now. It doesn't disgust me. I've come to terms with it. Everything has slotted in. I think meeting the partner was the main thing. If I'd never met any partners, it could have stopped my acceptance. (Beattie, mother of Mick, from South London)

> Not long after Gwen came out, she went to live with a partner. It was a case of getting on with it. It was no good me saying, "I don't want to do this." She was happy. That took a lot off my shoulder. I was happy now she'd got friends. It's not very nice to see your child lonely, especially as I'd never been lonely. (Valerie, mother of Gwen, who is a voluntary worker)

After meeting partners and learning about how the lesbian and gay communities connects to their children's lives, many parents began to see the importance of the lesbian and gay communities to their children. This encouraged some parents to further explore how other areas of social life impinge on their children's gay and lesbian identities. Many became aware of how lesbians and gays are treated within some sections of the press and how the media reinforced stereotypes concerning lesbians and gays.

> I got angry at the way society deals with the homosexual issue. What right do the papers have to tell me that my son is a pervert? (Kate, mother of Dean, who is involved in parents' groups)

For Dulcie, mother of Andrew, understanding and coming to terms with her son's gay identity, also meant confronting the negativity that her religious beliefs held as regards lesbians and gays. As Andrew, a chemist from Manchester asserted,

> It was her need to understand religion and being gay, to overcome this difference the church seems to emphasise. I told her that I didn't choose to be gay. But she was faced with a church that said people could choose. She had to marry these two contradictions.

Elena, a secretary and mother of Scott, reported,

> In our Care in the Community bulletins, there was nothing about caring for lesbians and gays. I couldn't understand it. So I put pen to paper and wrote to the health authority. Why can't those at the top use the word "lesbian" and "gay" in the brochure? It should be used in a normal conversation, not in ridicule. It should be brought out into the open.

Having sought support from, for example, friends and parents' groups, as well as with help from their children, all parents and their children agreed that they had changed since disclosure. All parents had come to accept their children's sexual identities. They became more comfortable with it. However, there were different degrees of change. Some parents and their children agreed that parents had not changed personally towards their sons and daughters. They were still the same people. They had changed towards the stereotypes concerning lesbians and gays. They change towards the aspects of their children's lives that they did not fully understand up until this point. Voydanoff (1983) refers to this as "definitional coping". Family members alter their perceptions towards the stressor. Parents who went out to explore the lesbian and gay communities and experienced it, became more familiar with it. They understood that it is a part of their children's lives, so they come to accept it. They achieve a balanced family-to-community level of adaptation. They begin a complementary relationship between the family and the wider community (McCubbin and McCubbin 1993). Parents continue to love their children, but they learn that they are now loving their lesbian and gay children. This is similar to Muller's (1987) loving open relationship where parents learn to accept a child's lesbian or gay identity.

> It falls into levels. She hasn't changed on one level, in that she still loves me. That's consistent throughout life. Has she changed because I'm a lesbian? No. Has she changed because that has brought up issues? Yes, because it's made her more broad-minded. She no longer feels that I can be cured, but emotionally, she's always loved me. (Gwen, a student from Leicester)

Folkman and Lazarus (1991) when discussing coping and emotion, assert that coping processes will change relationships and attitudes as a result. The data analysis suggests that both parents and their children see each other differently as a result. Most parents did believe that

they saw their gay sons and lesbian daughters differently now that they had come out. Parents acknowledged that their children "were" lesbian or gay. However, parents did not perceive their children differently because they now knew that they were lesbian or gay. They perceived them differently due to the traits and qualities that their children acquired as a result of being lesbian or gay and of coming out to themselves and others. Some parents saw their children as more "assertive" and "confident", "less withdrawn" and "happier". Also, when lesbian and gay children saw their parents differently, this was the result of having watched their parents pass through the acceptance process. Observing parents go through this process positively influenced how children perceived their parents more than parents' positive changes in reactions to them. Children could see their parents changing as parents made contact with lesbian and gay communities and children's partners. Children had something clear to measure and confirm the changes. Some respondents expressed pride in the fact that their parents had made the effort to understand. Other lesbians and gays expressed pride because their parents could now help other parents to overcome problems as a result of having a lesbian daughter or a gay son. The qualities and traits that changed parents were the result of passing through an observable process. Children were in no doubt as to whether their parents were actively trying to change.

Passing through the acceptance process also allowed parents to see why, in the past, their son or daughter had been unhappy or lonely in the past. The past and the present were unified. Parents can now understand their children retrospectively and acquire an ability to accept a lesbian or gay identity in the future. Parents had successfully achieved "adaptation" (Gibson 1998). The past has been integrated into the present in such a way that it does not threaten the future. A "reconnection" had been made between individuals (Lewis Herman 1992). Nevertheless, once again, there were some degrees of seeing each other differently. Dean told me that his mother was still the "same" person. He saw her differently as a result of her overcoming any stereotypes concerning lesbians and gays. Mick, who is a travel agency manager in his thirties, reported how his relationship with his mother had always been close. But now he saw her differently because she had accepted his friends and the lesbian and gay scene. However, his mother did not see him differently.

> I'm not a different person. I've got the same strengths and weaknesses that I had before. She can now see that I'm contented in my relationships and in my life.

Parents have achieved what Ortner (1990) refers to as "elastic distance". Individuals can critically evaluate cultures and identities that are different from older and established relationships and identities. Different identities can become personally meaningful as individuals are faced with different contexts and meanings. As Fuchs (1996) points out, identities are not fixed by static cultures. They are negotiated and contested by differently positioned individuals in interaction with each other and their culture. New relationships and identities challenge the traditional concept of the family (McCleod and Crawford 1998). Parent-child relations transcend the normative conventions of heterosexuality and the traditional family (Stacey 1996). They are negotiated and altered between members as opposed to reliance on traditional obligations (Stacey 1996; Beck-Gernsheim 1998).

Those parents who coped with initial negative reactions by reaching out beyond the family to, for example, parents' groups, changed as a result of completely changing their negative reactions. When parents are able to obtain support beyond the family, emotion-focused coping such as distancing is only used initially. Once they have reached acceptance through obtaining support beyond the family, parent-child relations are normalised due to complete acceptance and change of attitude. After acceptance, coping mechanisms are dispensed with. This contrasts with parents in the first category who constantly rely on the coping mechanism of distance to normalise relations with their children. In the first category, normalised relations are "within" the coping mechanism. There is no cutting off point. In the second, coping is a signifcant factor in "leading" to acceptance. Hence, relationship and identity formation in the postmodern world require negotiation and lead to different outcomes. Relationships and identities are comprised of personal experiences, social contexts and are constructed in relation to others (Weeks 1995). The postmodern world allows for identification across many potential differences (Weeks 1991; Edwards 1994). However, careful planning is involved and outcomes are the result of interpretation and negotiation, depending on the situation of individuals at any given time. (Beck-Gernsheim 1998). The concept of the family is fluid and malleable (Hyde 1993).

To summarise, initially all parents are faced with personal issues and concerns and issues and concerns that transcend the family. However, those parents who continue to focus on personal issues and concerns did not become accepting. By concentrating on personal issues and concerns, parents failed to go beyond the family for help and support. They limited whom they

turned to for help and support. Instead, these parents were more likely to distance themselves from their children's sexual identities on order to cope. Distancing controls the meaning of the stressor. It lessens the threat posed by it (Pearlin and Schooler 1982). Some also coped simply by, for instance, accepting that their children were not going to change or at least were happy. However, they remained negative about their children. The most negative outcome was where parent-child communication completely broke down. This was because children's sexual identities came to blight every aspect of them and their relations with their parents. The old role cannot be mourned and a new identity does not materialise (Weinberg 1972). Individuals cannot attain successful emotional processing (Hodgkinson and Stewart 1991). Change and the normalisation of relationships are tied up within the internal coping mechanism. Any likely change is likely to be the result of a change in coping mechanisms. However, it is more likely that some parents will turn to their son or daughter for help and support too, particularly if they are limited in who they can turn to. Different degrees of change are likely to be more salient in this case. Coping mechanisms such as distancing means that children are likely to develop coping strategies themselves to deal with it. Lesbian and gay children limited communication with parents or drew closer to more positive members of the family.

Those parents who saw beyond personal issues and concerns could begin addressing issues and concerns that transcend the family and are more likely to become accepting. This as a result of reaching beyond the family and the old image of the child for new information, knowledge and support. Supportive friends and family members and parents' groups were the most significant factors in helping parents to become more accepting. This help and support eventually lead parents into the lesbian and gay communities and gave them an understanding of their children's environment. It also helped them to see how their children's sexual identities affected them beyond the family, for example, prejudice in the outside world. Turning to a wider range of people also helped them to overcome anxieties connected to personal issues and concerns. For example, anxieties that a son will have no wedding or wife could be lessened by a focus on the benefits that his same-sex partner will bring to the family. Focusing on those issues and concerns that transcend the family often lessened those personal issues that parents initially faced as well.

Coping has been directed at reducing distress and changing the family schema (McCubbin and McCubbin 1993) to incorporate the lesbian or gay member back into the family.

Adaptation is achieved by passing through a range of experiences (Folkman and Lazarus 1991; Gibson 1998). As Shontz (1975) asserts, when discussing coping with disability, after acceptance, coping mechanisms are dispensed with. Folkman and Lazarus (1991) when discussing coping with stress, refer to this as a problem-focused coping process aimed at altering situations that cause distress. The result is similar to Weinberg's (1972) concept of a love theme, whereby love and loyalty transcend society's hostility. As Strommen (1990) argues, a new lesbian and gay identity is created by dispensing with stigma. Individuals attained successful "emotional processing" (Hodgkinson and Stewart 1991). Distress declines and more positive experiences can proceed. However, parents' reliance on their children is likely to be limited. Many children felt that they could cope better themselves if parents turned to, for example, other parents. Children were more likely to be intermediaries to their parents.

The Views of Lesbians and Gays since Coming Out

All lesbian and gay respondents whom I interviewed felt that they had gained at least something from having come out to their parents and proceeded through the above processes. Even those who still faced received negative reactions felt they had gained something from disclosure. These ranged from immediate gains to gains that were more long term. "Loss of fear", "security", "integrity", "sincerity", "reassurance", "peace of mind", "relief" and "confidence" were among the many things that lesbians and gays mentioned as a gain after coming out.

The fact that an individual did not have to hide himself or herself anymore was cited as being one of the biggest gains of all. They now at least had the choice of presenting a lesbian or gay lifestyle to their parents for validation, whether it was validated or not. Children could put their fears of remaining a bachelor or a spinster aside now that parents knew of their sexual identities. In addition, many lesbians and gays felt that their parents had gained as a result. They were now in the know. They could now stop asking questions concerning marriage and children.

> It was the last hurdle. Once my parents knew, I couldn't be threatened by anyone. I could be a whole person. I hated family doos. My sister got married. They constantly asked questions. No one will ever ask me that again. They know. (Arlene, a waitress from Nottingham)

Many lesbians and gays also felt that they had gained as coming out and clarifying parental relations had strengthened certain characteristics specific to the individual. Being honest and telling the truth about their sexual identities meant that children had stayed true to the qualities that they most cherished in their relations with other individuals, in particular, their parents.

> I would have hated seeing someone behind their backs. I'm just not that way with my parents. I like being upfront and honest with them. It's the sort of relationship that we have. Even if they disapproved, I would still have felt better that they knew. When I was experimenting, not seeing other women on a full time basis, I didn't mind them not knowing. It was something that I was exploring. But once I'd made the decision, I wanted them to know about it. (Christine, a student, daughter of Patricia)

Respondents also mentioned some more long-term gains. These were most likely to be that coming out and clarifying relations established them as independent beings as much as sexual beings in their own right. Now that they had come out and assumed a sexual identity that was different from most other family members, they felt they could be independent in a whole host of other spheres, for example, when they go out, who they go out with, and where they live.

> It's an important part of me. It's different and it helped me to get my own identity away from them as an adult. Being gay is remarkable in letting them know that I am an individual and not like my family. (Freddie, 18, on a college course from Mansfield)

Many felt that they had been strengthened by having come out to their parents. They were now more prepared to come out to other people beyond the family. This was particularly the case where parents had changed positively. However, what is most significant, is that on the whole, it is not parental reactions that influence positive gains. A positive gain is measured by the fact that at least a parent knows about a child's lesbian or gay identity. Parents' knowledge of a child's sexual identity is more of a gain than parents' positive reactions. This is born out by the fact that even those who received quite negative initial reactions and developments in relationships felt they had gained from coming out. Lesbians and gays can gain strength, relief

and peace of mind despite negative parental reactions.

After looking at first parental reactions, the issues and concerns which arise and the developments in relations and outcomes, I focus on identities and relations in the light of whether parents changed or not. I look at whether respondents felt different from their families as a result of being lesbian or gay and degrees of difference. I also focus on the family's influences on a respondent's lesbian or gay identity.

FEELINGS OF DIFFERENCE FROM THE FAMILY

All respondents believed that they felt different from their families as a result of being lesbian or gay. By "different", respondents referred to experiences that set them apart from their families or made them feel outside of the experiences of other family members. When respondents spoke about whether they felt different as a lesbian or a gay man from their families, two explanations became salient. First, there were those who felt different from their families as a result of feeling negative towards or estranged from their families. Others felt different because they believed that societal hostility beyond the family put a distance between them.

Most respondents believed that their lesbian and gay identities made them different from other members of their families. These were most likely to be the ones who attached significant weight and importance to their lesbian or gay identities. Some consciously wanted to be different and seen to be different from the rest of their families. Some were even hostile to aspects of their families. Those who wanted to be different believed that their lesbian and gay lifestyles set them apart from the rest of their families. They believed that living with or loving a person of the same sex immediately set them apart. These were more likely to see the lesbian and gay communities as more paramount in their lives as compared to, for instance, family gatherings like weddings. They were also likely to be hostile to heterosexual conventions such as marriage and traditional family values. This is what Paolucci et al. (1977) call "role conflict". Nevertheless, they were not hostile towards them as their families live them out on a day to day basis. The dislike of them was the result of the belief that they were expected to do these too at some point in their lives. They were hostile that before coming out, religion and traditional heterosexual conventions had been an expectation and had been imposed on some of them. This was compounded as some realised that this had made disclosure difficult. As a result, many had

been forced into redirection strategies that were explored in Chapter 3.

> When I was at school, I was really straight. I was president of the Christian Union. But I hated it all. I was put on these pedestals. But I wanted to be like other kids. When I went to university, I felt I could do what I wanted to do. I didn't want to be conventional. That meant being different from the family. My sister writes to me and her letters are full of God. I think, "This letter isn't written to me. It's written to the rest of my family. That's when I feel that I'm so different from the rest of them. Whatever my family say to me on the surface, underneath, their lives are completely different from mine. (Madge, a physio-therapy student in her twenties)

Identity formation is the product of feelings concerning the past and how the future will be (Worchel 1998). A sense of difference was likely to be compounded as more and more brothers, sisters and cousins married and had children. Respondents did not object to other family members choosing this life course. However, they realised that as a result of this, their parents would become closer to brothers, sisters and cousins. Parents would find that they had more in common with brothers, sisters and cousins. Hence, it was the implications which heterosexual conventions had on them which affected them most. For Tom, a worker with children with special needs, from Loughborough, difference was accentuated when he was around children. He felt different from the rest of his family in that he did not foresee him having children. Children connected his brothers, sisters and cousins. It was the one thing they all had in common.

> I do feel odd that I'm the only one who is not going to have any kids. I'm on the defensive in case the subject comes up. I'm more aware of the fact that I am gay. If I'm around people who see it positively, I don't feel different.

Tom's mother Josephine who had come to accept Tom's gay identity also had the same problem when her son was in the presence of children.

> Sometimes, I wish it wasn't the case. I still wish he was straight sometimes. I watch him children and think, "If only, it had worked out differently." That's only occasionally. We just get on with our lives.

The main means of consciously asserting difference from their families was to make it visibly and verbally clear that the individual lived differently from their parents and families. The realisation that they were lesbian or gay made them want control back. For Joan, a hospital worker, action was most important.

> Action speaks louder than words, by what I will and won't accept. Action allows a different set of standards by demonstrating that I am living them.

Tessa, a lesbian and gay project officer, from Nottingham, asserted,

> I'm not willing to compromise because it took me a long time to come to terms with my sexual identity. Before my grandmother's funeral, my mum said to me, "You are going to wear a skirt." I thought, "I'm damned. I am not going to go as someone else." I won't compromise.

Another means of asserting difference and independence from the family was to take a critical stance towards traditional, heterosexual family values and expectations. As Simon (1996) argues, increased individuation in the postmodern world means that conventionally prescribed identities become more problematic. Individuals feel that their identities and scripts do not fit traditional identities. By focusing on how they were constricted, some began to re-evaluate the traditional expectations. Individuals begin to examine the established goals of a given group (Worchel 1998). Individuals move from identification with a group to examining how "productive" they can be within a group (Worchel 1998). This would include examining how compatible the familial identity is with the sexual identity. For example, many lesbians and gays in the sample, wanted to have children at some point in their lives. What they rejected was the idea that only heterosexuals can have children. Some respondents reported that they had wanted to have children prior to coming out. However, this was the result of wanting to cover up that they were lesbian or gay. Having children could hide their emerging lesbian or gay identity from themselves and other people because people who have children "must be heterosexual".

Taking a critical stance meant acknowledging these were the wrong reasons. It is "cognitive restructuring" (Falloon et al. 1993). Their families could not equip them with the right or real reasons for wanting children. Coming out meant they could re-evaluate why and how they might have children in the future with regards to their own needs and experiences. They did not just want children to appear "normal" and mainstream. Hence, identity construction becomes political (Calhoun 1994).

Postmodern differentiation means we can create different identities. Prescribed social identities are no longer automatically assumed, but can be utilised to suit specific needs and the construction of different identities (Simon 1996). Taking a critical stance towards traditional values involves refuting and displacing labels and identities usually associated with specific contexts. Having and raising children has normally been seen as a fixed heterosexual preserve. Hence, lesbian and gay identity construction, in this case, involved struggles with other identities and labels, which are usually seen as fixed and not open to negotiation. Turner et al. (1987) assert that identity formation assumes a dynamic character. Individuals pass from one identity to another according to changing contexts. These changing contexts motivate individuals to seek situations whereby the new identity becomes salient (Worchel 1998). As Daniel, an information technology worker, asserts,

> Children are a confusing issue for me. Before I accepted the fact that I was gay, I had this need to be a father. When I accepted that I was gay, that was not so much an issue. In the future, I might consider getting in with a lesbian couple, bringing up a kid between us. I'm not planning my life on the basis that my parents want me to have kids.

Another strategy that respondents used as a result of feeling different from their families was to concentrate on maintaining relations with those who felt were most accepting of their identities, even if they felt different from them. They believed that this gave them more choice over who they associated with. They could focus relations on those members who validated their sexual identities most.

Many of those who felt a fundamental difference from their families, however appreciated that they still kept in contact and could carry through relationships in other ways.

Some wanted closeness because they were aware of other lesbians and gays who had been entirely ostracised from their families. They also shared a degree of similarity in that they all shared a sense of continuity and history with their families. Families had been there all the time even where individuals attached significant weight and importance to their gay or lesbian identities. When times had been hard, either emotionally or even financially, the family had been through it together. Their families were still a part of them even if they felt different from them. The family was the past even where it did not matter so much in the future. These lesbians and gays could not easily separate themselves from the past. Coming out had proved to be the cutting off point. It was easier to distance themselves from that point than before. As Worchel (1998) asserts, conformity to a social group may require an individual to subordinate certain personal needs. Many respondents believed that in some cases, their own personal needs were paramount as opposed to familial traditions.

However, other respondents perceived themselves as different from their families because they believed that they lived in a society that emphasised difference. Society's hostility towards lesbians and gays set them apart from their family. Even where parents were largely accepting, respondents still had to face hostility and prejudice beyond their families. Society's disinclination to validate their sexual identities gave them a different experience from the rest of their families. Families never have to confront such hostility or prejudice on a similar scale. This is where lesbians and gays express a realisation of the external and hierarchical categorisation system that stigmatises certain individuals (Goffman 1963). The actual social identity is denigrated according to an external categorisation process. Lesbian and gay respondents found themselves crossing the boundaries of two collective identities (Jenkins 1996). The first identity, the familial or group identity, is part of the respondent in that it is recognised, or at least acknowledged, by family members. The lesbian or gay identity is partly constituted through recognition that is observed and categorised as stigma-bearing beyond the family. The family as a group may be accepting, but this acceptance is found in a limited space. Beyond the family, the respondent is likely to be treated different. This also highlights Jenkins' (1996) argument that membership of groups, for example, families, is different from membership of, for example, an external category. Group membership is achieved through recognition by its members. However, membership of a category is not based on relationships between members. It is externally applied (Goffman 1963).

Those lesbians and gays which saw their experiences within society as setting them apart from their families were far more likely to want closeness with their families. This was the case even where parents were not as positive as many individuals would have liked. Hostility in society was more likely to draw them back to their immediate families. Those who attributed difference due to societal hostility were much less likely to feel in control. Even where parents were not as positive as some respondents would have liked, they could still provide for some security. Acceptance, if not understanding could draw them back into the fold. Some lesbians and gays who saw themselves as different from their families also felt they could connect to their families in other ways, through, for example, educational similarities or similar interests. However, this was easier for those respondents who did not give primary importance to their sexual identities. This was also more feasible if parents were positive as regards a child's lesbian or gay identity. If a family member did not exclude a lesbian or gay person from other interests in family life, this could provide respondents with information as to where the family member stands as regards a lesbian or gay identity. Information as to acceptance and understanding could still be gauged even if the subject of sexual identities was not touched on. For example, if a lesbian or gay person is not excluded from other family events, then this is some indication of tolerance, if not acceptance. Again, respondents that felt different from the rest of their family as a result of the wider society still wanted closeness. They felt a sense of continuity and a sense that they had all shared past experiences not necessarily connected to their sexualities.

FAMILIAL INFLUENCES ON LESBIAN AND GAY IDENTITIES

When reporting how their families influenced their lesbian and gay identities, respondents fell into two categories. The first category are those who believed that their families did impact on how they constructed their sexual identities. For example, some respondents gave parental acceptance as a main influence on how they perceived and constructed their identities. Other respondents felt that they did allow their families to influence them in that they maintained and were guided by family values and expectations. However, family values and expectations were lived out differently. The second was where respondents reported that their families had no influence on how they perceived and constructed their identities.

Many respondents, whom I interviewed, believed that their parents and families had a big impact on the way they constructed and perceived their lesbian and gay identities. For

example, many saw parental acceptance as a large influence. The fact that parents were positive had given them confidence and reassurance. The problems which lesbians and gays had faced within themselves seemed more worthwhile due to their parents' positive influences. Whilst the individual was coping with change and uncertainty, positive developments in parents had given them some stability and certainty. This palliated the anxieties and concerns which lesbians and gays had as regards themselves. These people who saw parental acceptance as the biggest influences were more likely to be the ones whose parents had made the change to acceptance. They had not seen their parents, for instance, distance themselves from their lesbian or gay identities. They now encountered very little negative reactions to compound any personal problems that they had towards themselves as lesbians and gays. Hence, this demonstrates that identity construction is as much collective as it is individual (Calhoun 1994). Personal identities are not only the expression of autonomous individuals, but are the result of a search for recognition and legitimacy between individuals and groups. As Daphne, a checkout assistant, stated,

> My family likes me for me. I'm still the sister and daughter. I don't think they see me as a lesbian, but Daphne. I don't feel I'm denied that identity. It's always been like that. I hug and kiss my brothers. I don't have to broadcast it. They know and there are no issues with it. I don't want to be treated any differently. They don't play on the lesbian. I haven't changed.

Parental and familial experiences, values and reactions were also given as having a big impact on lesbian and gay identities. Some reported that, despite being lesbian and gay and of being part of the lesbian and gay communities, they chose to maintain the values and principles which parents had instilled in them. This provided a connection to the family. It was an expression, that despite seeing themselves as different, they still shared the continuity and past experience which I spoke of previously. As Jenkins (1996) points out, even when individuals construct their own personal identities, they do this by drawing on such things as kinship which are definitively collective. Beck (1992) has referred to reflexive biographies. This is where individuals' personal identities can be comprised of other aspects of different lifestyles, social groups, social ties and identities. Respondents chose to maintain the aspects of their familial identities that best suited them as lesbians and gays. In what Beck (1992) refers to as "institutional biographical patterns", individuals enter different groups and locations and

construct a personal biography on this basis. Biographies become self-reflexive as life situations become more open and are subject to personal construction (Beck 1992).

> My family taught me right from wrong. I'm living how they brought me up. I'm perpetuating this with my partner. If we hadn't had this, we'd probably be going out having sex with different people every night. (Scott 41 year old retail worker)

Some lesbians and gays believed that they automatically continued to adhere to the basic expectations and values of their families. They allow themselves to be guided by them. They continue to believe in them. Deaux (1993) points out that social and personal identities can be deeply intertwined. Aspects of the social, in this case, familial identity, interact with the personal and sexual identity. However, on a more practical level, these expectations and values are lived out differently. They reflect parental values and expectations in different non-heterosexual relationships. Lesbians and gays reflect the qualities that their parents want to see in them, from, for instance, openness, honesty, ability to care for others, through to monogamy and parents' desires for grand children. However, all this is achieved differently from how parents would have imagined. For example, many lesbians and gays mentioned that one of their parents' main expectations was that their children were to be happy in their day to day lives. Children could demonstrate that they were happy in a same-sex relationship as they would have been in a heterosexual relationship, were they heterosexual. This demonstrates that the construction of a lesbian or gay identity is also dependent on a commitment to a familial identity. Identities are never the result of a fixed essence or are ever a fixed accomplishment (Calhoun 1994). Rather, they involve a dialogue between a whole series of different aspects. In this case, aspects of the familial identity are seen as necessary in the construction of a sexual identity which the respondent can be comfortable with. A sense of continuity is involved. Identities are formed through "bargaining" (Simon 1996). The reflexive self chooses from different identities. The self becomes a politics of self-coalitions, negotiating with alternatives.

When parents could see that their children were adhering to basic values and expectations in different non-heterosexual relationships, they found it easier to relate to their children. Reflection entails stability. Their lesbian and gay lifestyles and same-sex partnerships appeared less different than the lifestyles and relationships of their heterosexual children. A shared social identity is maintained.

> My parents' expectations are ultimately for me to be happy and I've met that expectation. There's also been the expectation for me to live my life in the way that I feel happy. That's being a lesbian and in a relationship. They know that they are going to get grand children. Even from the age of five, I was saying that I was going to have children. But there was going to be no daddy. (Jane, a former President of a University's Lesbian and Gay society)

Joan, whose father could never accept her lesbianism, and had been ostracised from much of her family explained,

> It's a rather funny thing. My parents were very old fashioned. They were certainly into marriage, certainly into monogamy. They were into "family comes first." Actually, I do that. Although never in a month of Sundays would they ever have wanted me to be a lesbian. I do live my life as they would have wanted me to in that I am totally devoted to Salli. I am completely family orientated. Everything that I am now would delight my family if Salli was a man. I am living my life how that would have wanted, but with one exception.

Anna Maria, who is in her twenties and works in a sports shop in Sheffield, also believed that her parents had a large impact on how she perceived herself as a lesbian. Although her parents had been negative, she felt stronger in having dealt with it. Her parents' negative reactions woke her up to the reality that she wanted to be different from her parents.

> They make me very aware of the very essence of what it's like to be a lesbian. That is that you are different. You sometimes have to struggle and it's very hard not to give in and conform. They make me see that this isn't a normal life. To other gay people, their lives are completely normal. They are a constant reminder to me that I am living a life, which is completely different from the one I imagined. To me that's a very positive thing, not to be making the same mistakes my parents did. Anything I can do different from them is a good thing.

However, parental beliefs not only guided how a lesbian or gay individual related to her or his parents. They were also used beyond the family, for example in the lesbian and gay

communities. Their upbringing provided a sense of continuity between their family lives and their lives in the lesbian and gay communities.

> I still feel I live my life by the same values and principles that the rest of my family do. So, I lead my life in the gay community on that basis. They control the way I've carried out my life as a gay person, and the bits of the gay scene I've chosen to get involved with. (Mick, who lives in London, in his thirties)

Respondents in the second category believed that their parents had very little or no influence on how they saw themselves as a lesbian or gay person. Whereas some respondents had mentioned that acceptance was a major influence on how they saw themselves lesbian or gay, some asserted that parental acceptance did not influence the way they saw themselves as lesbians and gays. This was because parental acceptance is a parental acknowledgement that they are not going to change. Hence, parents could have no influence over the way that children lived their lives or perceived themselves. Some lesbians and gays believed that the family had no influence on them because the family did not adequately understand what it was like to be lesbian or gay. They did not have the knowledge in order to influence their children. Adrian, son of Dulcie and Percy, believed that most of what his parents knew about lesbians and gays came from him. Phil, a cleaner from Manchester and son of Rose, believed his mother's influence was limited because there were certain parts of his life that he did not discuss with her.

> I don't tell them all that I do. They don't know the sexual life. It's embarrassing. But that bit's important to me. I want to nob off in the evening when I go out. They wouldn't want to know that. So they don't know what I'm doing.

In both these cases, Adrian and Phil saw their relationships with their parents as being one where parents support them rather than influencing them. Another main reason why lesbians and gays believed that parental influence was limited was because their parents were so negative as regards their sexual identities. If a lesbian or gay identity was not sufficiently acknowledged because parents distanced themselves from it or blocked it out, then parents ensured that they could have very little influence over their child's sexual identity.

SUMMARY

This Chapter has examined the internal theme as outlined in Chapter 1. It has analysed the post-coming out experience. This focused on parents' first reactions, issues and concerns which arise as a result and developments in relationships from disclosure to the present. It then considered how close a lesbian or gay person feels to their family after disclosure and whether their families continue to influence them. Chapter 5 will look at the external theme as outlined in Chapter 1. The external theme concentrates on how lesbians and gays experience the lesbian and gay communities and other aspects of the outside world. These experiences will also be compared to experiences in the family. The influence of lesbian and gay involvement in, for example, work and the lesbian and gay communities, on parents will also be considered.

CHAPTER 5

THE FAMILY AND BEYOND

INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 5, I will venture into how lesbians and gays experience their lives beyond the family, paying particular attention to how they manage their identities in the outside world. I will then briefly examine how parents are affected by their children's lives in the outside world. I will then proceed to further explore how lesbian and gays experience the lesbian and gay world, for example, the commercial scene, friendship networks and how their involvement affects parents. The outside world is defined as those locations beyond the family, for instance, place of employment, school, college or university. However, I have chosen to concentrate on the lesbian and gay world separately from the rest of the outside world for research purposes; for as Krieger (1982), with reference to lesbians, reports, lesbian communities impact on the formation and negotiation of lesbian identities. As was the case with families, the lesbian and gay world appeared appropriate to all respondents. All respondents had at one time or another used the lesbian and gay world to explore their identities and other lesbians and gays. Most felt it had been important to them at some point in their lives. It had an important impact on the construction of identities.

LESBIAN AND GAY EXPERIENCES BEYOND THE FAMILY

Whether respondents experienced the outside world as either negative or positive depended on how much they felt they were accepted or stigmatised. For example, some respondents believed that they worked within an environment where "coming out" was accepted and easy. Others experienced their neighbourhoods as areas where being out was made more difficult. Past research shows that many lesbians and gays prefer to conceal their sexual identities in the outside world for fear of violence and discrimination (e.g., Kitzinger 1991; Herek and Berrill 1992). Ellis (1996) points out that stereotypes of lesbians and gays pervade the workplace as much as anywhere else.

As we saw in Chapter 3, 27 of the respondents were in employment at the time of interview. Many respondents believed that working within a lesbian and gay friendly environment made coming out beyond the family easier. These environments were likely to be in middle class occupations.

> I never made it an issue at work, a talking point. The job I'm paid to do isn't dependent on my sexuality. I'm not going to be measured on that. I get results not by whether I'm gay. But I also have the principle whereby I'm not going to lie to people. If they ask I tell. I've not got the sort of job where I'd have to consider saying that I was straight. I'm a manager in the travel industry and there are lots of "queens". (Mick, who is in his thirties and manages a travel agency in London)

> I'm not representative of other lesbians and gays. I think I'm fortunate in the area which I work, which is in the NHS and voluntary sector. Both are reasonable environments to be a lesbian. Usually, I make links with other gays. It's also mixed with the fact that I mix with liberals and intellectuals. I don't mix with those who are right wing. (Tessa, a lesbian and gay project officer from Nottingham)

Many other respondents reported that they experienced some parts of the outside world beyond the family negatively. They were more likely to be subject to more stigma than within their immediate families. Susman (1993) defines stigma as a persistent trait of an individual or group which evokes negative and punitive responses. A lesbian or gay identity can be seen as a "discreditable" stigma (Goffman 1963). It is not readily visible to observers. Given this, lesbians and gays who came across stigma developed strategies so as to manage this stigma within the outside world. As Cain (1991b) asserts, lesbians and gays are involved in a lifelong process of information management about sexual identity. All respondents had developed a positive sexual identity. They all used selective disclosure in uncertain contexts, for example, if they felt they might be subject to homophobia. However, some respondents were more concerned with the social repercussions of disclosure than others. Those who were less concerned used their sexual identities to empower themselves and abandon the quest for legitimacy. They did not feel that they had to justify their sexuality or have other people legitimate it when they encountered

stigma.

Selective disclosure was employed in situations where respondents felt that they might be subject to homophobia, for example, a respondent disclosed only limited information to others even when he or she had come out to them. Martin (1982) sees homophobia as similar to sexism or racism in that they all encompass negative attitudes towards those who are subject to them. Denial by passing or concealment is a means of maintaining legitimacy in encounters in the outside world (Romans 1992). However, despite selective disclosure, all respondents were striving to come out to as many people as possible. Selective disclosure is a balancing act. It may involve a lot of self-monitoring and the use of disidentifiers (Goffman 1963), for example, pretending that a partner is a close friend. As Christine, a student in her twenties, reported,

> I've never had any desperately bad experiences, but I've chosen where I'm going to say that I'm a lesbian. For instance, over the summer, I was working in a car showroom and I didn't tell anyone about my girlfriend because I gauged from the situation that it was a mostly men set up. I'd either have the piss taken out of me or a lot of questions. I have to gauge more openly, what the situation is. When I first started going out with my girlfriend, we went over to Nottingham for an outdoor concert. I was used to being really hugging and kissing at university. There, it's fine. But all of a sudden, I had to really rethink those attitudes and think, "Is it safe? Can I do this here?" That's been very difficult to get used to.

Even when a respondent was out to most significant others in life, selective disclosure is still practised. For example, Denzil, an airport worker in his forties, is out to all of his straight friends. Nevertheless, as he reported, he felt that there were still certain things that he had to conceal from his straight friends.

> I don't know how much my friends really know about a gay lifestyle. There are things that I do which I couldn't tell straight friends because it would shock them. Most straight people have a problem with the idea of cottaging, which is something that quite a lot of gay people do. But for me, that was the only way that I could meet someone else who was gay. It's something you discover almost

by accident, but it's the only way of meeting people.

Hence, selective disclosure is employed even where a respondent was not generally concealing his or her identity from, for example, friends. For Denzil, selective disclosure could be beneficial to him, as he believed it was a compromise. By selectively disclosing aspects of his life from his straight friends, he believed that it strengthened relationships with them and protected him from any social repercussions. Selective disclosure was perceived to be beneficial by other respondents too. Others believed that it made life easier if they concealed aspects of their lives, particularly when they were uncertain about others' reactions.

> I like being overtly out on the street and being able to confront people. I now work in an outdoor pursuit centre. I haven't told anybody. If they ask questions which are slightly dodgy, I'll be honest. But no one's asked and I haven't told anybody because that's a more threatening situation. If you are going to be dangling fifty feet from a cliff with someone, I'd like to trust them. That's good in a way because I can hide myself. (Anna Maria, who works in a sports shop in Sheffield)

> At work, I have been a colon-hydrotherapist, so that is basically washing people's bowels out for a living. This means having to be very intimate with them. I'm having to do rectal examinations. Because of that, I'm not out to all my clients. I'm out to the ones who I think can take it. I have some very sort of upper class ladies who would freak out if they knew. I think it is a necessity. I don't particularly like it. Within the rest of the community, I'm as out as can be. When you've got a child who walks into a shop and says, "I've got two mummies who love each other", you can't be in the closet. (Joan, a hospital worker in Sheffield)

Selective disclosure is easier to manage when respondents believed that they could come out to more people as time progressed. They saw selective disclosure as more of a compromise to make life easier, than as a denial of their lesbian and gay identities. They saw the people whom they concealed from as people who intermittently appeared in their lives, for example, clients and work colleagues. As Cain (1991b) suggests, concealing sexual identity is easier when there is a degree of interpersonal distance between individuals. Acceptance of

sexual identity by these people did not matter as much as, for instance, close friends and work colleagues. Siegal et al. (1998) also assert that strength of relationship influences selective disclosure.

However, some respondents reported that selective disclosure of their lesbian and gay identities emphasised their difference from others in the outside world. It could feel like denial of their identities. As Cain (1991b) and Davies (1992) point out, individuals compartmentalise their lives. Others felt resentment at having to selectively conceal. It was a reminder that even when a respondent is out generally, there are still times when he or she will encounter negative reactions from the public. Having to conceal a relationship with a partner from selected individuals made some respondents feel extremely resentful. As Alonzo and Reynolds (1995) argue, individuals may feel isolated. Escoffier (1975) points out that concealing sexuality in, for instance, the workplace, requires avoidance of certain social interaction which could advance promotion.

Nevertheless, as was mentioned, in many cases, selective disclosure is seen as temporary. Most respondents were working towards coming out completely to those whom they concealed from. Selective disclosure is a strategy which lengthened the coming out process. But most respondents saw it as working towards eventual disclosure to these people. In the long term, most respondents felt honesty and certainty were more important than concealing from others in order to manage uncertainty and protect themselves.

However, those who were less concerned about receiving negative reactions in the outside world asserted that they were proud of their identities. As Romans (1992) suggests, these are individuals ready to confront a hostile society. They demonstrated to others that they were positive about their identities. They employed their positive identities as indicators to the outside world that they would not be discriminated against. Many reported that the process used to arrive at a positive individual identity could be applied to deal with negative reactions in the outside world. They had become more positive in themselves. By struggling against discrimination in the outside world, they were reinforcing their own sense of pride in their sexual identities. As Romans (1992) points out, these are individuals ready to risk, for example, rejection, rather than compromise their identities. Terry, who was positive about his gay identity and who now worked with lesbians and gays, commented,

I've had nasty experiences. The car got burnt. Before I came out, someone would make "poof" comments. Since coming out, I rarely hear that. I don't think it's because people have stopped saying it. I think they dare not say it in front of me. That's quite empowering. It's a nice thing to get rid of, that people can't speak to you like that and have to be careful in what they say. It's a position of power. Sometimes, heterosexuals expect to have homosexuality confessed to them in a slightly guilty way. When it's not, they are confused and don't know what to do.

Many, who were not worried about homophobia and discrimination, felt encouraged to go on the offensive and put the problem on to those that discriminated or reacted negatively. Elliott et al. (1982) assert that stigma interrupts interaction because it threatens the stigmatised individual's legitimacy. Those with stigmatised identities are seen by "normals" as possessing characteristics which deligitimise encounters between them and the stigmatised individual. For example, stigma can render a person who is tainted with it as, for instance, incompetent, undeserving, inconsistent or threatening. Lesbians and gays can often be seen as peril, depicted as AIDS carriers (Jones et al. 1984; D'Augelli 1998). They are seen as illegitimate or abnormal because they threaten family values and the traditional gender order (McLeod and Crawford 1998). Where legitimacy is threatened, individuals must negotiate illegitimacy by establishing and justifying a claim to legitimate status with normals.

Putting the problem on to others was a means of empowering oneself by asserting that the respondent was not the person who was disrupting interaction. Respondents make a claim to "authenticity". This is where individuals decide not to conform to external and hierarchical categorisations of themselves, but seek to realise who they believe they are and search for alternative definitions. Individuals distance themselves from those aspects of society and culture, which they believe fail to legitimise or authenticate their identities. To claim authenticity means to search for recognition in other ways, whilst abandoning any search for the legitimacy requested by the mainstream society on its terms. As Elliott et al. (1982) point out, the individual did not feel a need to search for legitimacy. The respondent did not capitulate to stereotypes or prejudice (Elliott et al. 1982; Susman 1993). Respondents believed that they disempowered those people who had negative reactions since they could show that they could confront bullying, threats and name-calling. Individuals refuse to see themselves as different from anyone else (Jahoda et al. 1988). Rather, a distance is put between how normals perceive

respondents and how respondents view themselves (Jahoda et al. 1988). Individuals aim to normalise themselves (Becker 1981), not through the search for legitimacy, but by abandoning this search altogether. Respondents believed that this made them stronger. Taylor (1991) argues that the search for authenticity occurs as traditional ascribed social hierarchies dissolve, allowing different identities to emerge. Individualisation occurs as a result. They strive for recognition on their terms and on an equal basis by negotiating with others, rather than simply subscribing to the old ascribed identities.

> Now and then, I do go out and get shouted at, "faggot", and all things like that. One day, I was walking past this building site and they all shouted at me, "Look at the state of that." And I turned around and shouted, "Well, you don't have to fuck me, do you?" If you fire back at them, they've got to think again the next time they say something. They've got to try and catch me out next time. I don't care what people think about me. (Sean, who is an unemployed teenager from London)

> I'm not the person with the problem. Either the new person that I meet accepts me for being gay or he or she just doesn't feature in my life. I don't need them to feature in my life. People only hurt you if you allow them to. (Jason, who attends a lesbian and gay youth group in Hackney, London)

As Jahoda et al. (1988) point out, the stigmatised do not always internalise the stereotypical conception of who they are supposed to be. As Markova (1987) believes, development of a self-concept is dependent on the negotiation with the views of other people. However, as Dankmeijer (1993) points out, coming out and defending a lesbian or gay identity is more important to those who define it as important in their lives. For example, he found that some lesbian teachers perceived their lesbian identities as secondary to feminist identities.

To summarise, all respondents had developed positive identities, but they choose a strategy of selective disclosure as a compromise. However, those who were less concerned about the social repercussions of disclosure felt that they did not have to work to maintain legitimacy with "normals". This, they believed, empowered them.

THE OUTSIDE WORLD AND THE FAMILY

Gergen (1991) argues that the disappearance of the immutable self in postmodernity presents individuals with different locations to fit into so as to feel comfortable with any given identity. Within these locations, individuals can discover which is most compatible with their identities. They can develop "fractional relationships". This is where individuals choose locations to develop relations and experiences built around aspects of their identities. This leads me to consider how respondents experience the outside world as compared to their families. When asked how they perceived the outside world in terms of their sexuality as compared to their families, respondents fell into three main categories. The first were those respondents who found experiences in the outside world more positive than within their families. The second were those respondents who found experiences in their families more positive than in the outside world. The third were those respondents who found that experiences within both were similar. It is important to bear in mind that most respondents did not live with their parents at the time of interview. However, most had contact with at least one parent.

Experiences of the Outside World are More Positive than in Families

Most respondents who fell into this category reported that they felt closer to people in the outside world, such as lesbian, gay and straight friends and work colleagues. They believed that they found more acceptance of their lesbian and gay identities than they did from their immediate families. Friends and work colleagues, for example, were more open to talking about problems which they had to confront either in the outside world or within their immediate families. These respondents were also most likely to have parents who were less accepting of their lesbian and gay identities.

> I talk to friends more than family. I have friends that I can say anything to, that I can't with the family. I will always be closer to the outside world. (Don, a chiropodist living in Nottingham)

The outside world provided a place where respondents could find alternative views as regards their sexuality and obtain alternative advice about any problems that they faced. They believed that the outside world could provide an environment to validate and support their

lesbian and gay identities where their families could not. As a result, respondents believed that it was in their interests to put more effort into cultivating and maintaining relationships with people who they encountered in the outside world. They also tended to spend more time with supportive individuals in the outside world.

Many respondents believed that the best advantage of contact with the outside world was the ability to be able to select those individuals who they felt most comfortable with. The outside world was larger than the immediate family. It provided more opportunity to explore areas and individuals where respondents may feel supported. A respondent felt more able to choose whom he or she came out to and whether he or she would cultivate relationships based on the response. On this basis, respondents reported that they always discovered that more people were accepting of their sexual identities. Finding more support and acceptance in the outside often put a significant distance between respondents and their immediate families. However, where as in the outside world, respondents felt they could be more selective in who they interacted with, they felt that this was not the case with families. It was far harder to cut ties with members of their families. As Davies (1992) asserts, much of the social structure is permeable. Other parts are intransigent. It is easier to choose and cut ties with friends, than it is with families. As Mick, who is a manager of a travel agency in London, asserted,

> With friends, you select them. I've had straight friends to come out to and I felt I could run the risk of losing them. You are stuck with the family. You are born into them. You don't pick them. You can run away, but it will come back and haunt you if you don't tell them. You can't get rid of your family. They are there.

Madge, a physio therapy student in Nottingham, reported,

> It's easier in the outside world than with mum. In the outside world, it doesn't give a fuck, but with my family, it does matter. If someone walks down the street and they are homophobic, then I just think it's their problem. But when my family say something, it's not just their problem. It's my problem.

Homophobia and intolerance in the outside world was far easier to ignore, however, than when it arose in families. Some respondents felt that people in the outside world were more

likely to be won over than people within their families. People in the outside world were seen as more liberal and having more opportunity to have known other lesbians and gays.

Experiences of the Outside World are Less Positive than in Families

Respondents who found experiences in their families more positive than in the outside world were more likely to have families who were accepting of their lesbian and gay identities. What their families felt and thought were seen as more important than what others in the outside world thought about them. Having accepting families entailed that respondents felt at ease with their families. They did not have to constantly struggle to find out who was accepting and who was not.

> Things are different. I come home and relax. I don't need to argue as much, say, the case for equal rights. In the outside world, it's an uphill struggle. You choose your battles. You argue with people. You accept the limitations. (Jason, who is eighteen years old and attends a lesbian and gay youth group in Hackney, London)

Respondents felt that there was more certainty within their families than there was in the outside world.

> My family understand me. I feel comfortable. I can tell my partner that I love her. On the streets, I couldn't do that. (Daphne, a check out assistant from Nottingham)

> The outside world is anyone you might meet who might be prejudiced. I know I won't find that in the family. (Matthew, who works for a Dutch publishing company in Norwich)

> The difference is underneath I know what my family are thinking. They accept and love. In the outside world, I don't know what they think. They may be fine to your face, but behind your back, we don't know. With my family, I know where I stand. In society, I'm not sure. People don't always accept you. (Scott, a

retail worker from Leicester)

Having families who were largely accepting tended to highlight and emphasise possible prejudice and abuse within the outside world. Also, having accepting families made respondents more sensitive to prejudice in the outside world. The family became a refuge from possible abuse. Respondents could be themselves in their families.

Levels of Acceptance in the Outside World and Families are Similar

Some respondents believed that the degree of positivity experienced in families was similar to the outside world. Those who felt that they experienced both as positive did so as a result of having opportunities to disclose their sexual identities to both and receive positive reactions from both. As Jane, a former president of a university society in her twenties, asserted,

> My family and the outside world respect me for who I am and what I am, and who I choose to spend my life with. I've been able to educate both the outside world and my family in that everyone's an individual, and therefore, has the right to choose who to be, who they are. I'm just waiting for someone to say, "Fuck off, you dyke." I'd be "What?, Excuse me", because it's something that I've never encountered. Therefore, I wouldn't know how to deal with it. But because I've got all these strong friends and family around me, I could just stand up and say, "I'm not worried about you. You're not worth the hassle, mate."

However, some who believed experiences in their families were positive reported that they had positive experiences of the outside world because they chose to, or were fortunate to come into contact with the most positive aspects of the outside world. Escoffier (1975) argues that lesbians and gays will choose to involve themselves in certain parts of the outside world, for example, certain occupations, on the basis of whether they are likely to face discrimination. Choice played a part in why Andrew, a chemist from Manchester in his thirties, experienced both as positive.

> My outside world is very accepting, as is my family. My friends are gay and they come here. There's no difference. But if I go to straight places, there's a huge difference. I feel very out of place in straight clubs. I don't put myself in that situation.

Christine, a student in her twenties explained that much of her life was spent at university. However, she perceived university as a "half way house" between the outside world and her family. This was because university was a closed, liberal environment, which did not reflect the real outside world of potential prejudice.

> I feel I can be totally myself with my partner at home. We can sit and snuggle on the sofa. University is probably a half way house between my family and the outside world because it's hip, cool, right on place. If anyone tried to question me, they'd be up before the union council. But obviously, people come from the outside world with different opinions into university. But I feel safe enough to be who I am. I find it more difficult to come out in the work place because it's more of an alien environment.

Those who claimed that experiences in both families and the outside world were negative saw that they had to struggle against stereotypes and prejudice in both. Both the family and the outside tended to mirror each other. The outside world was merely a larger reflection of what a respondent had experienced within his or her family. As Nicola, an office worker, from Sheffield, commented,

> There haven't been many places where my sexuality wasn't an issue or was accepted, but in a curious sort of way. There's been people in the outside and the family have wanted to rip my head off and shit down my neck. Sometimes, that's how my mum feels. I'm evil and perverted and she's got to stop me from being like this.

As Carole, an English and dance teacher from London, explained,

> They're not particularly different. My parents had a fairly stereotypical view of homosexuality and it was representative of what the outside world thinks. My parents were coming from the general public. To a large degree, my physical appearance helps. I don't look like the ideal dyke. Even now, I have short hair and parents coming to the school say, "What's the matter with you? Why don't you look like a woman? You would look so pretty in a dress." I turn around and say, Why? I'm on my hands and knees. I'm teaching P.E. everyday." It's a way of neutralising it.

To summarise, when asked how they experienced their families as opposed to the outside world, respondents came under three categories. Firstly, there were those who perceived the family as less positive than the outside world. Secondly, there were those who saw the outside world as less positive than families. The third category saw experiences in both as similar.

The Impact of Lesbian and Gay Involvement in the Outside World on Families

The ways in which lesbian and gay children were or might be treated in the outside world concerned many parents. Many were worried about possible abuse and discrimination of their children. Fears about how a child would be treated as a result of his or her gay or lesbian identity was an influence on parental negative reactions. As Celia, who is doing an anthropology course and is mother of Ellie, asserted, when reporting her feelings when her daughter initially disclosed,

> I sat there crying. Before I was married I used to frequent a coffee bar in Soho and got friendly with the customers. I got friendly with this woman and we used to talk. One day she got beaten up. Her eyes and nose were bleeding. Her lips were split. I asked what had happened. She said, "They've done it because I'm a lesbian." I don't think I realised what a lesbian was. But I realised that was my first experience of meeting a lesbian. My impression is "Lesbians get beaten up." I couldn't bear the thought of my daughter being beaten up because of prejudice.

Nevertheless, as was mentioned in Chapter 4, parental acknowledgement of prejudice in the outside world is a concern that moves beyond personal issues. These issues were a strong influence on whether a parent moved from being initially negative to developing a positive attitude. As Edith, who is retired and mother of Daphne, commented,

> I just fear my daughter being set upon. She told me that when she goes out, she's always pleased when she gets into the taxi. She must be scared because people wait for lesbians coming out of the pubs. But she says that in the pubs, she can be herself.

Dean's mother, Kate, who is now involved in parents' groups commented,

> I was wary that if Dean came out of a gay pub, there would be groups of youths who will decide to pick on him because he was gay. Dean was always a small child. I've always been concerned for his general welfare. It just carried on into his early twenties. But you can't stop them from doing these things. I was concerned he would become a target for gay bashers. But I think the more I got on to the gay scene myself, the less I worried.

Rose, mother of Phil, who is involved with lesbian and gay youth groups reported,

> I suppose I always feel that he's having a bit of a hard deal. So you want to compensate. I would do this if my daughter lost her job or broke off a relationship. But with my son, it's not just about relationships. It's on going. It's something that will never come to an end because he's gay. It's society's problem. At some point, he will face hostility, either in the day or some week. I feel I must compensate.

Acknowledgement of prejudice in the outside world made many parents feel closer to their lesbian and gay children. The issue did not arise so much with regards to their straight children. In the post-familial world, families are no longer formed through or confronted with pre-determined issues and obligations (Beck-Gernsheim 1998). As Gergen (1991) asserts, in the postmodern world, pre-determined relationships lessen and individuals are confronted by

"perspectivism". This is where changing social and personal contexts encourage us to take on new perspectives of the social world and our relations to it. This creates new ways of thinking and "consciousness" as we adapt to perspectivism. As well as a concern for how children would be treated in the outside world, many parents were initially ambivalent as to whom they should tell beyond the family. As Strommen (1990) asserts, many families react to a member's disclosure by a desire to "maintain respectability at all costs". Part of this reaction may be a desire to keep quiet about a family member's sexual identity. Parents can feel the negativity associated with a lesbian or gay identity that may reflect on them (Hom 1994). Parents of lesbian and gay children can divide themselves from others in the extended family if they choose not to tell them. This could create family sub-systems (Burnett et al. 1996). Some individuals know and others do not. Relationships and identities now require planning and careful thought (Beck-Gernsheim 1998).

> The problem was, "How do I tell the rest of the family?" If they see other gay people coming to the house, they will judge us. My son's homosexuality was going to be the best secret ever. (Millie, a receptionist and mother of Alex)

Patricia, a hairdresser, and mother of Christine, reported that she was concerned not to tell her parents of her daughter's sexuality.

> Telling grand parents is a problem. We don't talk about it. If she goes to stay with her partner, I still say that she's gone to stay with a friend in London. I don't have a problem, but it's protecting Christine's confidentiality. It's up to her to tell people. I don't feel I should.

Burnett et al. (1996) refer to a "gay child-parent" sub-system. This encompasses possible changes in relations between a gay child and his or her parents. Jason's mother's worries about how he would be treated in the outside world, in this case, school, created a division between herself and her son. This was the result of her concerns for his safety. As Jason reported,

> Mum wasn't aware until a week later that everyone at school knew I was gay. That was a big thing for her because it meant everyone knowing about me. She didn't want me running around telling people. She didn't want me discussing it at school because I might be treated differently. She was frightened for me. I, either due to stupidity, or not fully understanding how to handle the situation, wasn't frightened for my own safety. That was a big thing for us for a while.

However, the most positive parents believed that to remain reticent was a denial of their children's sexual identities and their own struggles to accept their children again. As Hom (1994) points out, parents must also go through a coming out process. This entails coming to terms with embarrassment or shame and being able to tell other people that they have a gay child. As Burnett et al. (1996) report, despite being heterosexual, parents can become aware of their own vulnerability to the homophobia of mainstream society. For example, anti-gay jokes are likely to be reminders of what a parent can come up against. The family is no longer part of the mainstream heterosexual world. Society can deny them the label of "normal" family. Families may be able to pass as normal but live under the constant threat of being found out. Parents also begin to realise that they may be rejected as parents of a lesbian or gay man. When parents come out, they must constantly consider the impact on other family members too (Burnett et al. 1996). Honesty was a means of informing the outside world that they were positive about their children. As Wirth (1978) asserts, honesty and ability to tell others makes a parent appreciate what being gay or lesbian means to the child. Being able to tell others also improves communication with children. Telling others is a form of problem-solving (Wirth 1978). It is a means of finding out where each person stands in relation to each other regarding a child's sexual identity. However, Bob, father of Scott, who is a retired army officer, reported that he preferred to be honest. However, he believed he could be upfront about son's gay identity as it was not a threat to his own personal safety anymore.

> I like telling people about my gay son because I like the look on their faces. One particular period, I went to work for photographers and it was just for three hours in the afternoon. I'd only been there for a week and we were talking about families. Someone asked, "Have you got any family, Bob?" I said, "Yes, I've got a single parent daughter and a gay son." Now that stopped any silly jokes coming out by mistake. But this comes with age. I don't think I would have done

this if I wasn't fifty because you never know. If you've got a job and you are getting paid, you've got to be careful. When you're retired, there's no one to be frightened of. You can say what you like.

Those parents who came to accept their children's sexual identities developed what Shotter and Gergen (1994) refer to as a "positive ontology". Parents came to learn shared meanings with their children that enable them to understand and interact with their children. This allows for successful understanding and reduces tensions and anxieties. It enables parents and children to normalise their relationships. Social relationships are linguistically coordinated so that the new understandings and meanings are made "official" (Shotter and Gergen 1994). They also become more acceptable as opposed to when understanding was limited. Both parents and children are able to increase their stocks of knowledge of each other. However, where as some parents wanted to confront the outside world, many parents, as we saw in Chapter 4, were in denial and distanced themselves from their children's sexual identities. This prevented them from seeing possible prejudice in the outside world and from confronting it. Some parents could not separate their children from the negative views of them held in the outside world. Joan, a hospital worker in her thirties, from Sheffield explained,

> My father continues to see homosexuality as an illness, queer, weird, perverted, horrible, promiscuous, all the things the media have portrayed gays as. I mean he reminded me that Hitler killed thousands of us. He seemed to think that was right. It is the media that continues to portray gays as promiscuous, multi-partnered. I know lots of couples who have been in relationships for eight, ten, forty years. There's nothing remarkable about them. They don't appear in any statistics because there's very little known about them. The media want shock and horror. That's all my family ever see.

THE LESBIAN AND GAY WORLD

Davies et al. (1993) define the lesbian and gay community as an infrastructure and a "set of spaces" which allow a gay or lesbian life to be lived. This infrastructure consists of, for instance, commercial venues and specific interest groups. Weeks (1996) argues that the lesbian and gay communities provide for a collective organisation of identities and allows individuals to draw

upon various social skills that are not as easily available to individuals without these communities. This lesbian and gay subculture has been important in making lesbian and gays visible to mainstream society (Gilder 1989; Van Gorder 1995). Krieger (1982) defines lesbian communities as places of social support which give lesbians a shared sense of self "as lesbians" as opposed to the outside world. I began by asking respondents how they experienced the lesbian and gay commercial scene, for example, lesbian and gay pubs, clubs, and saunas. This was because I believed that the commercial scene seemed to be the best place to start. Respondents could then proceed to discuss other parts of the lesbian and gay communities such as social groups. Also, for most respondents, the commercial scene was the initial venue to start when they began exploring the lesbian and gay communities. Respondents fell into two categories. The first is where they perceived the commercial scene to be favourable. The second was where respondents perceived the commercial scene to be unfavourable. These respondents were more likely to prefer social groups and friendship networks as opposed to the commercial scene.

The Commercial Scene as Favourable

Respondents who perceived the commercial scene to be favourable believed that it allowed them to mix and socialise with other people who had shared experiences of being lesbian and gay. The commercial lesbian and gay scene integrated them into a community. Many believed that the commercial scene was how they initially discovered lesbian and gay communities, allowing them to begin making friends. It gave them a sense of collective identity (Davies et al. 1993; Fassinger and Miller 1996).

Respondents also reported that they felt that they could be themselves on the lesbian and gay scene. They also believed that the lesbian and gay scene validated their relationships with their partners because they did not have to hide themselves or their relationships. A degree of safety was felt by respondents who perceived the commercial scene as favourable.

> The scene is good with friends. With your partner, you can relax and be yourself. We can hold hands. In the street, we can't do that. The scenes's like my family. We're the same, together, the same type of people, pitched against the outside. As soon as I walk through the door, I let my hair down until I come out.

(Daphne, who is a check out assistant from Nottingham)

> The pubs are friendly. We've got a big thing in common. They are less judgmental. I can talk more freely. I don't have to keep check on my behaviour and monitor it as much on the scene. (Freddie, who is an A-level student from Mansfield)

> I found the feminist lesbian community annoyingly isolated and very judgmental. I found the gay and lesbian scene less judgmental of me because it's less insular. The mixed lesbian and gay scene is more welcoming and friendlier. Everyone's the same as me. Everybody knows what I might be thinking and feeling. I don't have the same concern about showing my affection. (Salli, who is a dental assistant from Sheffield living with her partner)

Coleman (1981) and Schneider (1989) argue that lesbians and gays need to develop skills and gain information to manage a lesbian or gay identity. Some respondents perceived the lesbian and gay commercial scene to be favourable because they saw it as a learning milieu. Experiences in the commercial scene were a way of learning about other lesbians and gays. Lemon and Patton (1997) argue that entry into lesbian communities requires a learning process, for example, how to behave and respond to other lesbians. Alex, who is an interpreter saw the lesbian and gay scene as a means of learning about other lesbians and gays.

> I never knew what to expect. I expected what my parents would have expected. I only knew a few "normal" ones. The others were going to be funny, dressed up as women and things. When you are in a club, you don't notice the ninety-nine percent who are normal. You notice the camp few. I was scared that I would not fit in, but only because I picked up on the unusual people. The more I went, I realised there were more like me. I'm more happy now.

Sean, an unemployed teenager from London, found the commercial scene a means of developing less intolerant attitudes towards different people.

When you go out to pubs and clubs, you don't know what to expect. Everybody is not the same as you. You may see a bloke in plastic, but you can't go in there and say, "I don't like you because you are into bondage." You've got to go in there with an open mind. Sometimes, I find it hard, but you can't judge people by what they wear. I've learnt that from my own experience.

The Commercial Scene as Unfavourable

However, many respondents perceived the lesbian and gay commercial scene to be unfavourable. Many found that it was too geared to casual sex and "one-night stands" (Yip 1996; Ridge et al. 1997). For many respondents, this did not fully serve their long-term needs, particularly if they desired more long-term relationships. The commercial scene tended to represent sex above all else (Yip 1996). It appeared too impersonal where emphasis was on youth and looks as opposed to companionship. They therefore felt excluded from the commercial scene.

I'm not a physically attractive person, so I'm not for the one-night standers. I'm relieved about that. I don't want to sleep around all over the place. It doesn't mean anything to me. In pubs and clubs, you generally tend not to meet the people who want relationships. (Derek, who is a local government administrator from Leicester)

I never have been one for the scene. I've never had to be. I've never been promiscuous or for one night stands. I've never had a relationship with someone I hadn't been friends with for a long time. I couldn't do it any other way. Therefore, the bed-hopping side of the women's scene holds nothing for me. (Joan, a hospital worker from Sheffield)

I'm as ambivalent about the scene as most gay men. There are lots of things which gay men hate about the scene. Yet you need it for support and to meet people. When you look at ads in the paper, and people say that they are very categorically "non-scene", I wonder what they're rejecting. You have to tolerate an awful lot. I find the vulgarity difficult to handle, the "fuck", "shag", "suck"

vocabulary. There's a lot of peer group pressure for promiscuity that isn't so heavy on the straight scene. Men go out there looking for relationships but end up in casual sexual encounters. It appears to be the norm. (James, who is 44 years old from Nottingham)

Other respondents claimed that they felt excluded from much of the commercial scene because they felt they did not conform to the expectations of the commercial scene. The commercial scene exposed individuals to expectations which affect their perceptions of themselves (Davies 1992). For example, the gay male scene is perceived to be organised around emphasis on physique and sexual marketability (Yip 1996). If individuals do not conform to this emphasis, they are likely to feel they do not belong to the commercial scene. Ridge et al. (1999) also found that gay men did not experience the commercial scene as supportive, open and friendly. Rather, many found that the commercial scene excluded them since they felt they were in constant competition with different commercialised styles and social classes. Also, membership of the gay male commercial scene has been defined through conforming to dominant images of masculinity (e.g., Segal 1990; Edwards 1994; Jeffreys 1994). Some respondents felt that other individuals on the commercial scene were hostile towards them because they did not feel that they conformed to the commercial scene. Jane, a former president of a university's lesbian, gay and bisexual society, complained that she was isolated from the lesbian and commercial scene because she did not conform to the "butch-femme" discourse. Schuyf (1992) argues that butch-femme roles have made lesbians visible. It was a rejection of femininity in heterosexual society. The lesbian scene perpetuated the butch-femme role as it provided a specific set of exclusively lesbian norms and values (Faderman 1992). Jane, a student in her twenties, disliked the public role of butch-femme, which was played out specificly in lesbian clubs and bars.

It annoys me that even on the scene, you are not accepted for who you are, what you do, what you don't do or how you dress. The fact that I have my hair long, people wouldn't pick up that I'm a lesbian because I don't have short hair. I'm not stereotypically butch. The only way I can let people know that I'm a lesbian in a gay pub, is my snogging another woman. That's how they know. They don't just look at me and say, "Oooh, she's a dyke." The scene puts people into pigeonholes. I don't like having a label stuck on my head and have said, "You're

a dyke." The scene rejects me for wearing dresses. You should wear a checked shirt and army trousers. It says I should be something else to fit in.

Some respondents reported that they needed the scene initially when they first came out, but felt that they now had "gay burnout" as time went by (Harry 1993). The commercial scene was important initially as it permitted respondents to discover what went on in the gay world. However many discovered that they did not need it as a significant part of their lesbian and gay identities.

> When I first came out, I was glued to the scene. All my friends had to be gay. I had to be out at gay clubs and pubs. It was everything because there'd been a lack of it for ten years. The novelty wears off. I was missing out on other friends. I've used the scene and it's used me. I never enjoyed being at a gay club because they are so seedy, tacky. The stronger I got, the less I needed the scene. It was a freak show. (Tom, who lives in Loughborough)

Friendship Networks and Social Groups

Most of the respondents who perceived the lesbian and gay commercial scene as unfavourable, however, did find that they received more support from lesbian and gay social groups. These social groups ranged from groups for young gay men who have recently come out, to groups for older lesbians. These groups provided for social events such as trips to the cinema or discussions around lesbian and gay issues. They also offered an opportunity to interact with and identify positive adult role models (Welch 1996). They also offered a place where others were more likely to understand them when their families could not understand them. Respondents identified two main benefits which we they obtained from lesbian and gay social groups, which they could not get from the commercial scene.

First, lesbian and gay social groups were less limited than the commercial scene. Lesbian and gay social groups did not only revolve around alcohol and sex. Many respondents believed that they were freer to make contact with other lesbian and gays without other people thinking that they were being predatory (Ridge et al. 1999). Lesbian and gay social groups were places where a whole host of issues could be discussed which were not connected to a sexual

context (DiPlacido 1998). As Becker (1981) argues, social groups allow individuals to adapt to a specific identity. Sandstrom (1994) reports that such groups offer alternative definitions of identity. Allan (1989) argues that individuals are more likely to feel that they can express their identities and needs more adequately in friendship relations than in other spheres. Friends "mould", "reinforce" and "challenge" our identities. Friendship is voluntary. It is more likely that individuals will perceive one another on an equal footing. Allan (1989) also makes the case that friendship is important for a sense of identity. Informal friendship networks help to sustain an individual's sense of self by treating him or her more particularistically outside of formal and institutionalised contexts. There are less institutionalised and external roles and identity performances, as is the case with work, the family and the commercial scene. Individuals do not feel tied to certain roles, conventions or ways of behaving. There is more scope to express and perform identity and feel comfortable with personal identity. As we have seen, many respondents perceived the commercial scene within the context of convention and conformity to external pressure. With reference to support groups and friendship networks, Don, a chiropodist from Nottingham, commented,

> I can meet people in support and social groups without them thinking I'm trying to pick them up. I can stabilise some relationships. It's positive. These support groups are different from the scene. The scene is a waste of time. I used to go but the people are looking for the stereotypical forty eight-inch chest and twenty-two inch waist. Because I didn't fit into that particular image, no one wanted to know me.

The last comment is typical of what many other respondents felt, that they could be more visible themselves in lesbian and gay social groups. They could be more than sex objects or individuals on the prowl. There were more opportunities within lesbian and gay social groups to demonstrate other sides of their personalities and personal interests, which were not associated with sex. There were also more opportunities to learn about personal and social issues concerning lesbian and gays in the wider world. Whereas the commercial scene was limited to alcohol and sex, lesbian and gay social groups could be a far deeper learning process. As Dean, an English teacher from Leicester, explained,

> The coffee bar was where I first met other gay people in a safe and friendly environment. There were little photo-stories for safe sex. I'd never seen anything like this before in my life. It was part of the coming out process, what was acceptable and what was not acceptable to see and read. It was a long process for me. I did not get this from the traditional scene. That's a different environment. If someone started to hand out pornographic images in a club scene, you'd probably take that as a come on or that it was supposed to lead to something. But the group was more educational, having a laugh. The scene to me is Saturday afternoon at the coffee bar.

Respondents also felt that they found a more diverse range of individuals within a lesbian and gay social group. These were people of different ages with different interests. Secondly, because lesbian and gay social groups offered the opportunities to meet a wide diverse range of people, respondents were more likely to meet friends who they considered genuine. The commercial scene offered one-nightstands and impersonal relations. Lesbian and gay social groups allowed respondents to meet genuine friends who they felt they could bond with. These friendship networks, along with the lesbian and gay social groups, began to replace the commercial scene as a respondent's main source of companionship and social life. Allan (1989) distinguishes between two types of friendships, "participation in social activities" and "companionship and intimacy". Participation in social activities is where individuals routinely participate in some activity, but do not recognise it as friendly or as a main source of intimate friends. Companionship and intimacy is where individuals recognise that they do gain much social support from certain friends. Respondents perceived social groups and friendship networks within the context of companionship and intimacy, whereas the commercial scene tended to be see within the context of participation in social activities. The commercial scene became less important as friendship networks deepened. Lesbian and gay friendship networks allow lesbians and gays the chance to express intimacy and identity (Nardi 1992; Berger and Mallon 1993). They also serve as means for various types of social support, for example, monetary help and healthcare. Friendship networks provide alternative means of relating to other people as opposed to conventional social and familial relationships (Little 1989).

Nardi and Sherrod (1994) and Sandstrom (1996) argue that friendship is important to lesbians and gays as a means of social support within a hostile culture. Developing friendship

networks did not mean that lesbian and gay respondents did not continue going to pubs and clubs. However, it did entail that going with friends made in the lesbian and gay social groups, made the commercial scene seem less threatening and isolating. The less favourable aspects of the commercial scene were mitigated as a result of developed friendship networks. The scene becomes more peripheral and friendship networks become more valued. Fischer and Sollie (1993) also argue for the importance of friendship networks as individuals separate themselves from other networks which they see as unfavourable to themselves. Hence, lesbian and gay respondents found it was possible to develop a lesbian or gay identity without full immersion into all aspects of the lesbian and gay community (Fassinger and Miller 1996). Lesbian and gay social identities are built around different aspects such as friendship networks and emotional attachments (Cox and Gallois 1996) which are not easily obtained on the commercial lesbian and gay scene. Identities can be chosen depending on where the individual situates himself or herself (Beck 1992). For example, if an individual feels less of a sense of identity on the scene, there are alternative sources. Particular aspects of an identity can become more salient according to one's location within different contexts (Weeks 1995).

> I'm not a scene person. At worst, I see it as a meat market. Rather than use the scene, I use networks, other groups and individuals that I've met. It's somewhere I can fit in. It comes from feeling alienated as a youngster. I didn't have a peer group that I could relate to when I was young. That's because I was so different. To find myself with a peer group for the first time was a revelation. These have become my friends, more than my biological family. (Tessa, who is a lesbian and gay project worker)

Hence, the commercial scene played a limited part in influencing whether lesbians and gays developed high self-esteem and positive social and personal identities beyond immediate families (Cox and Gallois 1996). However, the development of friendship networks appears to be more important in this process. Respondents formed attachments within the lesbian and gay communities through choice and negotiation. The emergence of a collective identity is constituted through individual's perceptions and attachments to a series of locations, for example, the family, the commercial scene and friends. Gatter (1998) when discussing AIDS and communities also speaks of an identity which is not "born of nothing". Different identities are negotiated according to perceptions and contexts. Collective identities are negotiated and

fragile (Jenkins 1996). Identities can be formed through fractional relations (Gergen 1991). Individuals chose different locations which they feel they are best able to perform their identities in.

THE LESBIAN AND GAY WORLD AND THE FAMILY

The Lesbian and Gay World as More Positive than Families

Some respondents claimed that they were more comfortable in the lesbian and gay world than in their immediate families. In the lesbian and gay world of, for example, the commercial scene and friendship networks, respondents felt that they were less conscious of difference than was the case in the family.

> There's more openness, more friendship, more acceptance. I'm ordinary on the gay scene. I'm not ordinary in my family. They are heterosexual and it's still fundamentally different from me. When I'm with my family, I'm conscious of the difference than when I'm not. (Salli, who is a dental assistant, living with her partner)

These respondents were more likely to have families who were not positive with or supportive of their lesbian and gay identities. Respondents felt that they could find social activities and other individuals with similar interests; whereas, with their families, they felt that they would not be able to change parents' views concerning their identities. Respondents felt that they obtained more support and understanding from the lesbian and gay world. They also pointed out that they could be themselves in the lesbian and gay world. There was more freedom as opposed to inside the family.

> It's this thing about openness. In my family, I can't be entirely open and they are not entirely tolerant of my lifestyle. On the gay scene, I can be open in lots of ways. When I go to the young persons lesbian and gay group, I can be expressive, give people hugs. At home, if I gave a friend a kiss on the cheek, then that would not be tolerated. (Daniel, who is an information technology worker from Nottingham)

> The family is different because it is very much, "Look after yourselves. Family is all that matters." In the lesbian and gay community, we spread ourselves more. Because we aren't putting energy into nurturing and caring for children, we can spread those feelings around more. You can feel included and cared for. You get an exchange. (Janie, who is a nurse from Sheffield)

The Lesbian and Gay World as Less Positive than Families

Other respondents believed that they felt closer to their immediate families as opposed to the lesbian and gay world of friendship networks and the commercial scene. These respondents were more likely to be those who had supportive and accepting immediate families. They felt that their families' acceptance of them was deeper than any acceptance that they received from the lesbian and gay world. They also perceived their families acceptance to be long term. Their families had always been there and would always continue to be. However, respondents did derive benefits from the lesbian and gay world. The main benefit was that of shared experience and the need to have contact with other lesbians and gays. This could be found on the commercial scene or within friendship networks. Typical comments were,

> The family is real. It's always been there and always will be. The scene was a phase. Being gay is not a phase. Being gay on the scene definitely is a phase. I didn't get anything like the support from the scene that I got from my family. (Tom, who works with disabled children and lives in Loughborough)

> The scene is so much more stereotypical and bitchy than my family. I don't feel I need it wholeheartedly. It's not a matter of wanting to be on the scene. It's a matter of being the only place where I can be myself. (Jane, former president of a university lesbian, gay and bisexual society)

> My family are the most important thing to me because I don't have to make the choice. But I'm glad to have the space where I can meet other lesbians. At present I feel closer to my family. Lesbian friends aren't like family. I was part of the lesbian avengers and that was never like a family. I felt accepted and recognised, but I never felt welcomed with open arms. You had to persevere to

get in there, to keep with it. There were no hugs. It's not a family, but it's comfortable to go to places where you recognise people and have things in common. In the family, you get the hugs. The lesbian avengers was hard work. (Ellie, who is a former member of Lesbian Avengers and living in London)

It's different in that I don't know everyone on the scene. But I can still be the same on the scene. We're in the same boat. There's not the same closeness on the scene that there is with family. But it's nice to be out there on the scene. (Daphne, who is a check out assistant from Nottingham)

Nevertheless, despite having positive and accepting families who they felt closer to, many respondents did feel that there was a cut off point between the lesbian and gay world of the commercial scene and friendship networks and their families. The lesbian and gay world allowed respondents to discover and learn about aspects of lesbian and gay life, which the family could not permit them. The family could provide support and encouragement. However, it could not so easily provide information and education concerning the lesbian and gay world. Martin, a forty one-year-old retail worker from Leicester, who had parents who had accepted him, reported,

We had close friends on the scene. A lot are dead, but they were like family. They were closer than family. We told them everything. The scene gave me a sense of belonging and acceptance that obviously my family couldn't. It gave me an identity. The family couldn't. They don't know how I feel because they aren't gay. Gay men had history in common, experience on the scene.

Cindy, a nineteen year old woman from London, who has been organising lesbian and gay youth groups, commented,

I got more support from my family than from the youth group. There wasn't a problem with my sexuality at home, but it was important to be around gay people which I didn't get at home. It was different kinds of support. I got information about pubs and clubs and gay people from the youth groups, which I couldn't get from home. However, it was information, rather than actual support.

Despite closeness with their immediate families, respondents felt families lacked the knowledge and experience to equip them with for life as a lesbian or gay person. Hence, there remained a point of exit from the immediate family even when relationships were close and affirmative. For example, despite acceptance from parents, respondents were still aware that parents might not be able to cope with the sexual and erotic imagery of the lesbian and gay press. Parents were also less knowledgeable about the existence and locations of lesbian and gay pubs, clubs and social groups. The lesbian and gay world was discovered and explored with only minimal help from immediate families.

Both the Lesbian and Gay World and Families are Similarly Positive or Negative

The third category were those respondents who experienced their immediate families and the lesbian and gay world as similar. Chris, an engineer, from Manchester, had had positive experiences of both the lesbian and gay world and his immediate family.

> The family is very similar to what gay people offer you. It offers support for you and won't turn its back on you. Someone somewhere else in the outside world would if they were not comfortable with you. The gay community is more inclined to be like a family. You look upon it as very, very lucky to have two families.

However, Jason, a London teenager, perceived the lesbian and gay world and his immediate family to be similar as a result of how he formed relationships with people within the diverse immediate family and lesbian and gay world. He could never take them for granted or expect ties with either to be consistent.

> Family is simply a word. It's blood, but it's been weakened and diluted. For my generation, family are more those people, who in times of need, I will turn to. But I won't expect them to immediately help. If I build up relationships with them, then there is the potential for help. But I'm not going to expect that just because they are "family". It's the same with the gay community. Once you think you are gay, there is this hope that you will be accepted into this community. People will support and help you because you are gay. We are all a minority

facing the same struggles. But the realisation of it is that you are not. There are men who have sex with other men, but don't necessarily live the gay lifestyle. There are so many sub-cultures on the scene, that you find yourself struggling with which one to identify with, be part of a gang. The diversity acts as a barrier to there being any sense of community.

The Impact of a Child's Involvement in the Lesbian and Gay World on Families

Respondents' involvement in the commercial scene, with friendship networks and partners also influenced relationships and identity negotiations within the immediate family. For example, how parents perceived the commercial scene, a child's friends or his or her partner influenced a parent's relationship with his or her child.

A child's partner was important to the acceptance process for parents. As was mentioned in Chapter 4, realisation that a child could have a partner in the future was an issue which could influence whether or not parents became accepting or not. Many parents reported that initially they were distant from a child's partner. They were alienated from him or her. For many parents, seeing their child and a partner together was a visible realisation that their children were or could be having sexual relations with another person of the same sex. When asked how they reacted to finding out about their children's partners, typical parental responses were similar to Tom's mother, Josephine's response.

It was hard at first, watching them hold hands. I was happy for him. But it was completely alien to all I'd seen and been brought up with.

Beattie, who is a retired widow and mother of Mick, recalled how she felt when she first saw her son with a partner.

You grit your teeth at the beginning because you do not quite know what you're letting yourself in for, never having met gay people.

However, those parents who wanted to understand their child's life beyond the family did come to realise that they could not ignore a child's partner. A partner had become part of the child's life. Many parents came to realise that accepting their children's partners was necessary to acceptance of their children. Parents were able to perceive that their children were happy and that children would not conform to the stereotype of, for instance, "the lonely gay man". Parents became more assured that their children still had the possibility of settling down and living happily. Those parents who became positive towards their children's sexual identities began to integrate their children's partners into their families. Gubrium and Holstein (1990) refer to familial discourses. These represent different ideas and meanings which individuals hold regarding what familial relationships are. They are employed to make sense of situations and plan responses to others. Family discourse is consistently negotiated and changed. Parents who became more accepting reinterpreted their ideas about their families and who was part of these families. For example, Kate and Ben, parents of Dean, began referring to Dean's partner's parents as "in-laws". As Tallman (1970) argues, if families are open to, in this case, other aspects of a child's life, this encourages communication with the child and his or her environment. As Valerie, mother of Gwen, who does voluntary work asserted,

> I'm pleased she has a partner. I wouldn't want her not to. There would be a division between us if I didn't know. She'd be in a terrible position. I don't want to come between them. I see her partner as another daughter.

Saltzburg (1993) argues many parents panic at the thought of what their children may be doing sexually which can distract them from coming to terms with their children's identities. I also found there was a tendency for many parents to separate interest in the social and relational aspects of their child's and partner's relationship, from the sexual side. This was particularly true when a child first came out and introduced a partner. This was for two reasons. The first is best elaborated on by Dean's father, Ben. Despite his willingness to understand and accept his son's relationship with another man, Ben could not initially get used to the idea of two men being sexuallly expressive towards each other. Ben felt that to have watched his son, for example, kissing another man, would have prevented understanding and acceptance. As Ben reported,

> You've got to remember that we were in still in the early days of getting used to the idea of my son and boyfriend being together. We have these ground rules about kissing because of the way I was. They don't kiss in front of me. It upsets me physically. I don't mind them holding hands and doing things like that. This is my house and I have to feel comfortable in my Englishman's castle.

Edith, who is retired and mother of Daphne, asserted,

> I can't understand my daughter sleeping with another woman. It's totally alien to me. I repress that misunderstanding to get on. There's acceptance if I can't understand it. They sleep together and make love together. How? I don't know. But they do.

As Klein and Hill (1979) assert, support is important in overcoming these problems. Dean, Ben's son was willing to comply with his father's wishes in order to facilitate the acceptance process. However, a second reason for separating the two derived from a wish to see their lesbian and gay children's relationships as no different from straight people's sexual relationships. It is a means of neutralising any problems, anxieties and concerns which parents have as regards their lesbian and gay children's sexual relationships. Parents believed that if they did not want to know about, for example, their straight children's sexual relationships, then there was no need to ponder over what happened in their lesbian and gay children's sexual relationships. It is a means of normalising the situation (Darling 1979). It is also a means of creating family continuity and stability (McCubbin and McCubbin 1993).

> After I'd got my head around my son being gay, I was quite happy that he had not done anything deliberately to upset me. He's gay because that's him. I would find situations cropping up when I had to check myself. I would question why I was thinking these thoughts. Why should I think particular thoughts just because Dean's in a relationship with another man. I had to analyse what it was that I didn't like. Obviously sex was part of it. But I suddenly realise that Dean's been to bed with a girlfriend and I wouldn't think twice of it. So why should I think twice about David with a man? You know, it's none of Dean's business what my husband and I do in bed. Once I'd got that clear, I was fine. (Kate, mother of

Dean who is involved with parents' groups)

However, Bob, father of Scott and a retired army officer, found that his son's affection for other men changed his views towards masculinity and affection.

> This business of Scott kissing his partner goodnight is O.K. They are funny people, the British. Before the war, if you didn't smell of B.O., then you weren't a man. During the war, there was an army group called "Poxies". They were a tough lot. That was the first time I ever came across men who used talcum powder. I thought that very strange. But now everybody uses talcum powder, even the toughest men. Things change. Having a gay son brought home that affection is normal, whoever it's between.

Such strategies demonstrate the construction of relationships and identities in the postmodern world. Identities are contextually constructed according to need and in relation to others' identities. Different strategies and possibilities exist (Weeks 1991; 1995). Heterosexuality is deeply ingrained within our personal identities (Richardson 1996). Most parents never question that their children will be anything but heterosexual (Bernstein 1990). Lesbian and gay identities mean that the conventional rules of gender and sexuality are shifted. In postmodern society, the traditional heterosexual family is challenged. Relationships are democratised and fluid (Stacey 1996; McLeod and Crawford 1998). Postmodernity confronts us with "social saturation". Relations and identities are emergent and in need of redirection (Gergen 1991). There are different ways of being and of relating to these different ways. Identities and relations are routinely created and reflexively managed (Giddens 1991). Even those parents who were now positive about their children's sexual identities initially saw the commercial scene and lesbian and gay social groups as consisting of dangers which parents felt they had to protect their children from, for example, promiscuity and one-night stands. These uncertainties affected parents' views of their children's sexual identities. As Rose, who is involved with lesbian and gay youth groups and mother of Phil, commented,

> The worries were where my son was going because of his age. I would come and meet him from outside of "these places" (lesbian and gay clubs and pubs) so he was sure of a lift home. This was so he was not left on the scene late at night. It's a way of alleviating my worries about what was possible. I could let myself feel like that now, but I realise he's older now. I have to stop myself. A new face appears on the scene and people are after you. Straight girls are in the same position. It was parents' instincts. But it wasn't the same that I have for my daughters.

However, the parents who had become positive with regards to their children's sexual identities began to perceive the commercial scene as more favourable to their children. This was the case even when parents continued to hold reservations about the commercial scene. Parents began to accept that children had a need to explore the commercial scene, lesbian and gay social groups and attend activities such as "Pride". They began to modify their views concerning the lesbian and gay world. McCubbin et al. (1993), in their discussion of family coping, argue that this change gives credence and meaning to changes within families. Changes in attitude towards the lesbian and gay world allows family members to adapt to their children's behaviour. Parents believed that if their children integrated themselves into, for example, the commercial scene and made lesbian and gay friends, then the children would learn more about themselves. Children could then communicate this part of their lives to parents. Through this communication, parents could continue to learn more about their children. McCubbin and McCubbin (1993) when discussing general family adaptation, argue that this constitutes a struggle to balance both the "individual-to-family" and the "family-to-community" levels of functioning. Not only must parents adapt to the sexual identity of an individual child, but they must adapt to, for instance, a child's partner and environment. Identities are constructed by negotiating within different contexts (Weedon 1987). Identity construction is always in the process of relating to other different identities. There are different ways of negotiating with different identities (Weeks 1991; Beck 1992; Craig 1997). Gergen (1991) refers to this as "ersatz being". Individuals develop a capacity to enter into different relations of different forms. New circumstances and contexts influence new reactions as the old obligations and relations are dispensed with. As Ben, a businessman and father of Dean, reported,

> I think that if we had a straight son, who went into town, went into a pub, came out very drunk, and got attacked, the rest of the men would stand and watch. But if you came out of a gay pub, and someone attacked you, the rest of the pub would come out on to the street and protect you. I think that makes us feel more comfortable because the gay community is so close, so protective of each other. We are probably worried far less now than if we had a straight son.

Nevertheless, other parents did continue to have reservations about how safe their children were within the lesbian and gay world. With reference to her daughter's involvement on the Pride March, Matthew, Christine's father, asserted that he was concerned about her personal safety. However, changes in attitudes towards lesbian and gays lessened this concern.

> It's not that I mind her campaigning, but it's what the repercussions might be. But there seems to be more tolerance on the part of the authorities than, say, twenty years ago. If Christine had been a pioneer for gay liberation twenty years ago, I would have been really concerned. The police were not gentle at all. The Pride marches now aren't about getting acceptance. They are about improving acceptance and having equal rights. That's helpful for my wife and I. Christine's less vulnerable to her own personal safety. We're more concerned about her personal safety than what she's doing.

However, Albert and Enid, a vicar and his wife and the parents of Madge, encountered difficulties in trying to accept their daughter. This was because they perceived lesbianism to be incompatible with Christianity. Enid and Albert were among the parents who, as was explained in Chapter 4, aimed to normalise relations through distancing themselves from much of their children's sexual identities. Enid and Albert attained this through distancing themselves from certain aspects of their daughter's lesbian and gay world which they disliked, whilst employing the aspects of it which they did feel comfortable about to reassure themselves. They felt more comfortable about their daughter's sexual identity because she was in a monogamous relationship. They were ambivalent towards the commercial scene and believed that a relationship separated their daughter from the dangers of the commercial scene. It made her akin to other family members who were married or in relationships. If Madge had a partner, her parents believed that she had no need for what they saw as the promiscuity and dangers of the

commercial scene, even if she continued to visit pubs and clubs with either friends or partners. Knowledge that their daughter was following some conventional traditions put parents more at ease. They did not feel that their daughter reflected the commercial scene. They took an interest in and cultivated a relationship with Madge's partner. Enid and Albert were only prepared to slightly modify the family schema, for example, expectations and traditional beliefs. As McCubbin et al. (1993) in their discussion of adaptation in general, argue this affects whether a family member comes to accept or change his or her attitude towards changes in the family.

> My husband and I are grateful that as a lesbian, Madge is not militant and on the scene. On the scene, there's the partner swapping side, the multiple partners. It's an orgy that comes over. That's offensive. I don't think that she is showing it to other people. But it happens with heterosexuals and we don't like that. Madge doesn't come from that so you are more comfortable. But she lives her life in a natural way. If you saw her walking down the street, you wouldn't think that she was a bit strange. She's the same Madge she's always been. However, it's odd to go out with Madge and her partner when they go out as a couple. There's an element of embarrassment. My husband and I walk arm in arm as a couple and they do the same. I think about what other people might say. I can take it in private. The problem is in public where people haven't had to have thought this through. People can be shocked. There is embarrassment, always having to look and see other people's reactions. (Enid, mother of Madge)

However, some parents remained hostile to all aspects of their child's involvement in the lesbian and gay world, for example, the commercial scene, partners and lesbian and gay friendship networks. These were the parents referred to in Chapter 3, who were in complete denial of their children's sexual identities. This involved denial of a child's partner, friends and involvement in the commercial scene and other lesbian and gay social groups. There are no aspects of a child's involvement in the lesbian and gay world which parents can use as a strategy to begin to come to terms with a child's sexual identity. Where there occurred a breakdown in communication between parents and children, parents were unable to obtain access to their children's involvement in the lesbian and gay world. They are unable to reduce tensions and make the necessary changes (McCubbin and Patterson 1983). Coping is dysfunctional (Patterson and McCubbin 1983). The child's sexuality is denied and parents fail to redefine their

children. As Tom commented with reference to his father,

> Dad's hoping I'll grow out of it. There's lack of interest. He's been embarrassed to talk about it. He's happy not knowing anything about it.

Nicola, who lives with her partner and two children in Sheffield, reported,

> I'm on the planet Earth. My parents are somewhere else. My mum thinks I have sex with every woman I know continually. What I want is for it not to be a big issue between us, that it's not a big brick wall that separates us from everything. It should be as simple and as clear-cut as saying, "I've got brown hair and I'm a lesbian. Which one do you want to discover first?"

Parents fail to obtain any information concerning, for instance, the lesbian and gay communities or a child's partner. Hence, parents fail to learn the realities and experiences of their children's lives. Children can often feel that they are being denied a part of their identity. Children can also feel that both themselves and their parent as are missing out on the positive aspects of each other's lives. The relationship develops negative aspects in that both parents and children come to see each other as the problem. Parents blame their children for the breakdown in the relationship because they might feel that their children are involved in an "immoral" life and are separating themselves from "normal" family life. There is parental desire that children should come back into the fold of the normal family. Children see their parents as the problem as a result of frustration that their parents can neither understand or accept their sexual identities and their involvement with partners and the lesbian and gay world. Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995), when discussing trauma and stress in general refer to primary and secondary coping. Lack of access to information about lesbians and gays means that parents continue to cope on the "primary" level (Tedeschi and Calhoun 1995). This can involve, for instance, self-blame and denial. There is no reliance on "secondary control" (Tedeschi and Calhoun 1995) where parents may reduce stress and disappointment through adapting to the stressor. Parents believe that to set aside previous expectations and perceptions of their children will result in more stress. As Strommen (1990) asserts, parents remain fixed at the initial conflict point. The image of the child remains negative and stereotypical. Hostility and ambivalence remain. Both parents who became positive or remained negative were confronted with new postmodern relations, subject

to negotiation and alteration as opposed to tradition (Beck-Gernsheim 1998; Weeks 1998).

To sum up, when asked to compare their experiences of their immediate families and the lesbian and gay world, respondents fell into three categories. The first were those who felt they were more comfortable in the lesbian and gay world, for instance, the commercial scene, social groups and the community, as compared to their immediate families. The second were those who felt closer to their families than the lesbian and gay world. However, the cutting point lays in the fact that the family cannot equip respondents with adequate knowledge and information about the lesbian and gay world. The third was where respondents experienced the lesbian and gay world and their immediate families as similar.

SUMMARY

Chapter 5 has examined how lesbians and gays perceive aspects of the outside world, particularly, the lesbian and gay communities. In their place of employment, for example, respondents used two main strategies of managing their sexual identities. The first was to confront prejudice by demonstrating pride in their identities. The second was to conceal their sexuality from others or conceal certain information from people they were "out" to. However, this did not entail denial of their identities. Most respondents perceived the commercial scene to be unfavourable and preferred to socialise in friendship networks as a replacement. Overall, Chapter 5 has also examined how sexual and familial identities are produced and negotiated within different contexts, and how these identities and locations overlap throughout the continuous construction and negotiations of identities.

CHAPTER 6

FAMILIES, IDENTITIES AND POSTMODERNITY

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will explore wider issues concerning sexual and familial identities and relationships. These issues will be related to the construction and negotiation of identities and relationships in postmodernity. It identifies three conceptual themes based on the findings reported in Chapters, 3, 4 and 5. This is consistent with the grounded theory approach, which seeks to theorise on the basis of empirical data. Firstly, individuals are active strategists in the production of postmodern identities; secondly, family relationships are constructed through discourses and social practices; lastly, familial and sexual identities and relationships are constructed in wider contexts beyond the family. This chapter will also attempt to make some recommendations for further research.

INDIVIDUALS ARE ACTIVE STRATEGISTS IN THE PRODUCTION OF POSTMODERN IDENTITIES

The research sheds some light on the idea that individuals are active strategists in the creation of social life within postmodernity (Lamphere 1987; Cheal 1991; Morgan 1999). Individuals do not conform to specific roles and identities that are pre-given or institutionalised, such as the instrumental and expressive roles, which Parsons (1971) believes, are essential to stable families. Rather, they assume the ability to create and negotiate these identities (Cheal 1987). As Lyon (1999) and Gibbins and Reimer (1999) point out, in postmodernity traditional values and beliefs lose control and coherence over us. Individuals face choices about whom to communicate with and which identities to assume in a fragmented world, which offers more consumer and lifestyle choices (Evans 1993). They confront new sources of identities as a result of the increasing differentiation, ever-increasing technological capacities and the mediasation of society.

> Personal identity becomes a matter of discontinuous experiences and identities, rather than a story of a developing personality. The postmodern individual does not experience the "sentimental education" and personal growth of Goethe's Wilhelm Meister or Dicken's David Copperfield. He or she is more likely to feel a resemblance to Luke Reinhart's dice-man, ceaselessly changing roles and identities in an eternal present (Kumar 1995: 147).

Changing roles and identities are also apparent in Gibbins and Reimer's (1999) concept of "disorganised capitalism". This is where the production and consumption of goods becomes less standardised and more choices are introduced. More consumer choice means that producers must be flexible and recognise individuals' abilities to distinguish between different goods. Linked to this is the switch from the production of material goods to "signs". These signs are non-material objects such as magazines, music and the media, which are used to signify specific identities and lifestyles. Individuals are able to identify with and express different identities and lifestyles. This is further enhanced by increased technological capacities. The expansion of communications and information technology increases our ability to recognise and interact with different signs, cultural symbols and identities. Mediasation refers to an increase in media technology and information and the ways that individuals interact with, for example, the Internet and new lifestyle magazines. In postmodernity, the media assists identity construction. The Internet, magazines and newspapers offer us information on different people and lifestyles. We turn to those parts that are more relevant to us, allowing us to ascertain which identities we find most conducive. The aesthetic and cultural experience of mediasation permits us to reflect upon what suits us. Bury (1998) argues that people are obliged to have a whole range of views about different cultural products and lifestyles. They can be recognised by signals, which signify certain lifestyles and ideologies. Giddens (1991) refers to institutional and individual reflexivity. This is where institutions and individuals become aware of the contingent and socially constructed nature of knowledge and the social world. Institutions and individuals are subject to change and revision. They can no longer rely on traditional knowledges and social practices, but must examine and change the social world for themselves (Beck 1992; Melucci 1996; Szerszinsky et al. 1996; Beck-Gernsheim 1998). The decline of traditional and preordained ways of behaviour and action means that individuals are more likely to come across "risk". Living in a risk society means that we live with a calculative attitude towards

open potentialities and possibilities, deciding on what action might have negative or positive outcomes. One takes responsibility for one's own life and course of action (Featherstone 1992; Lyon 1999).

As a result, the fixed and standardised identities of modernity differentiate. The expansion of the media, technology, identities and discourses allow us more knowledge of and access to different identities and discourses. Self-knowledge is always partial and open to contestation by other constructs and definitions (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992). Tradition and convention is weakened as individuals become the focus as they embark upon certain goals, explore alternatives, and take account of social situations and how others may respond to them in postmodernity. As Jane, a former president of a university's lesbian, gay and bisexual society, reported, when she spoke about disclosure to her mother.

> Coming out was quite difficult. I was 17 when I finally admitted it to myself. I actually came out to my friends before I came out to my parents. It was almost as if coming out to my friends was a test, to test the people who'd chosen to be friends with me as opposed to the family who had no choice over the matter. If my friends' reactions were good, then there was always a chance that my parents were going to as well. It was quite scary in that a lot of the time, they were going on about boyfriends and things like that.

Also, parents in this research search beyond the family for information and support in coming to terms with their children's lesbian and gay identities. In time, those children who had parents who remained negative decided on certain strategies to cope with these negative results. Some children had to decide the nature of the influences of their families on their sexual identities. As Bury (1998) suggests, individuals are supposed to be in touch with their inner most feelings and ready to talk about their individual and collective past and how this may affect the future. Self-identity needs to be constructed, balancing the demands of consumer culture and a plurality of lifestyles and ideologies.

The research shows that respondents actively engaged in what Gergen and Gergen (1988) refer to as "nested narratives" or "narratives within narratives". This is where individuals seek to create separate individual narratives and identities from the broader social group. Individuals come to possess individual identities and choose which aspects of the

larger identity to assume. For example, some respondents chose to maintain aspects of the wider familial identity and incorporate them into their individual lesbian and gay identity. Some believed that they consciously wanted to separate themselves from their families. James, who is in his forties and whose family have never accepted his sexuality, commented,

> If I could have been adopted as a child I would have. I've spent half my little seeking alternative families because I was uncomfortable. I need to walk away from a lot that's been projected into me. I get support from other gay people and straight friends. As a gay person, in relations, I'm careful not to abuse anyone. I don't want to transfer any of the negative means I picked up from my family.

This emphasis on interaction and negotiation has also lead to the emergence of life course dynamics (Elder 1985; Cheal 1991). Life course dynamics are the changes that happen in an individual's relationship to his or her environment over time. They are an alternative to the concept of the "family life cycle", which defines a singular and universal set of family stages, for example, marriage and the birth of children.

The individual as the producer of social identity is focused on by Beck (1992). As a result of increased individualisation, individuals come to take "risks" as they confront new choices, rights, alternatives and freedoms. As Gwen, who is in her thirties from Leicester, reported,

> I guess the reason that I was late coming out as a lesbian was because I thought that I had to make a choice between whether I had children or whether I'd come out as a lesbian. I wanted children. There are times when I am still broody. Because I have a choice, I know I can have them. But because I have that choice, I now know that I don't want children. I suppose I've been married to other lesbians because my relationships have been quite long. I guess it apes the stability that marriage has. We have a mortgage and a dog and the usual lesbian trimmings.

Individuals also proceed to reflexively monitor their own interactions and relations with others in the light of individualisation. Individual expectations and aspirations replace

traditions. The "standard biography" is replaced by the "do-it-yourself biography" (Beck 1992). The research demonstrates that often, individuals construct an elective biography, whereby they bypass older, traditional means of living. For example, many respondents did not conform to the heterosexual definitions of "dating" and "bearing children". They reflexively redefined why and how they may choose partners and children. Many respondents believed that even once they had disclosed, their parents could not advise them as regards these issues. Risk and individualisation, according to Morgan (1999), serve to undermine traditional conventions. Reflexive modernisation means that we can opt out of past tradition and choose other options. Giddens (1991) refers to institutional reflexivity. Institutions are able to create, invent and alter social knowledge and expert discourses, for example, the media and the medical profession. Modes of technical knowledge come to have validity independent of the practitioners who create it. This affects the social construction of our personal identities. Parents and children employ knowledge from counselors and parents' groups in the social construction of their familial and sexual identities.

Similarly, Beck-Gernsheim (1998) also considers that individuals are active strategists in the construction and negotiation of social and familial life, albeit as a response to larger social changes. Before industrialisation, families were formed for the sake of economic production and survival. Members of the family had similar experiences as a result of mutual economic dependence on one another. Families were tightly knit communities with a set of goals and common purposes, mainly that of economic cooperation. Personal wishes and individuality were subordinated. Families were formed through pre-existing rules and regulations. However, industrialisation created aspirations towards individuality. For example, the development of the welfare state made economic independence for individuals more likely. Individuals could gain a certain amount of economic independence of the family. The development of the factory system also allowed women to enter the labour market and gain a degree of economic independence. Individualisation created a move from the "normal life history" to the "do-it-yourself" biography. More negotiation and coordination is required if family members are to remain connected.

The everyday life world comprises individuals of different backgrounds, attitudes, identities and knowledge, for example, individuals form relationships with others from different classes and races. Choice is emphasised. Individuals are encouraged by the post-familial environment to construct their own forms of togetherness. The individual biography

and how it shapes family relations assumes more significance. How an individual constructs his or her identity is freely chosen. Families take the form of "elective affinities", where personal inclinations and identities assume more importance than traditional identities and the obligations which come with them. Individuals assume the responsibility as active agents to hold together different biographies, identities and relationships.

> Whereas people could once fall back upon rules and rituals, the prospect now is of staging everyday life, an acrobatics of balancing and coordination. The family bond therefore grows more fragile, and there is a greater danger of collapse if attempts to reach agreement are not successful (Beck-Gernsheim 1998: 67).

Similarly, Cheal (1999) also argues that studies in the sociology of the family have been moving in the direction of a focus on the individual. Again, changes in economics and gender have made relationships between autonomous individuals the main basis of the organisation of social life. Loosening social controls have had a profound impact upon diversification, which allows individuals more choice and negotiation. Cheal (1988) argues that contemporary familial relations are characterised by "moral individualism". This comes about as a result of the loosening of social control, which weakens traditional cultural codes and ways of relating to one another. Acquired rights to individual freedom and autonomy are closely related to commitments to others mainly through interpersonal bonding that is socially constructed. The focus comes to be on intersubjective biographies and how individuals communicate feelings of obligations and commitment and invent identities through symbolic communication and socially constructed relations.

An emphasis on individuals, symbolic communication and intersubjective biographies allow us insight into the limitations of the developmental stage models discussed in Chapter 1. The empirical data demonstrates that the early stages of coming out discussed in stage models can be applicable (Harry 1996). Many respondents did empathize with a process of experiencing same-sex attractions, reacting to them and exploring them further. However, this cannot be perceived as an essential process because variations within these categories exist, from misunderstanding same-sex attraction to being unaware of them. Furthermore, as time progresses, may respondents came to understand and interpret these early experiences differently, as they disclosed to families and explored the lesbian and gay

communities. They reflect upon these experiences as they "continue" to construct and negotiate sexual identities. For instance, some respondents came to perceive their early redirection strategies differently as they reflected on them as time progressed. Joan, a lesbian with a partner and son from Sheffield, got married to maintain her relations with her family. At the time, she perceived this as a necessary, if frustrating strategy, to hide her lesbian identity and maintain closeness to her family. However, when she was asked whether it was necessary to maintain closeness after disclosure and having terminated her relationship with her father, her response was,

> No, not at all. I might have answered that differently when I was younger. But I guess you harden up over the years. The family reap what they sew as you do everything in life. They pissed me off enough to create in me what they've created now. It serves me not to be closer to them. I'd say it was necessary not to be close to them. The day I discovered that I live my life for me and not my father was a very liberating one.

This is not to deny the reality of redirection strategies or the frustration of them. It is recognition that different understandings and interpretations of events will be constructed throughout the life course. This point does not sit comfortably with theories of developmental events, where stages progress having left behind previous stages.

It also needs to be made more clear that these stages and events can occur or fail to occur as a result of individuals' personal interpretations of events, which are influenced by their personal and social circumstances. As we saw in Chapter 3, Don a Chiropodist from Nottingham, perceived his same-sex attraction as "natural" because he understood it to be accepted and had never been aware of anything but attraction to men. Don did not know of the cultural stereotypes of lesbians and gays. His parents had never mentioned the issue despite their hostility to lesbians and gays. Personal understandings then create events and stages. They are not unitary psychological occurrences but are constructed through social and personal circumstances and understandings. As Don was never confused about or questioned his sexuality, he did not ask the questions, "Who am I?" or "Am I heterosexual?" He did not redefine his sexual identity to decrease incongruency in his interpersonal environment (Cass 1979). Whilst individuals can experience the events outlined in developmental and stage models of identity formation, these events are not inevitable but are socially and personally

constructed according to individuals' perceptions. The stages spoken of by Plummer (1975) and Cass (1979) do not exist outside of the individual's social circumstances and personal interpretation.

In the same vein, Silva and Smart (1999) assert that at the turn of the twenty-first century, in Western societies, individuals no longer follow rigid patterns of identity formation. Individual biographies are not predetermined. Instead, they proceed through changes in the life course. Individuals are constantly "doing" the family, as opposed to passively conforming to predetermined structures (Morgan 1996). Individuals are confronted with new obligations and commitments that they must assume. This assumes more emphasis on consciousness and action. For example, as Silva and Smart (1999) assert, lesbians and gays who form and create new definitions of families are consciously and actively changing traditional heterosexual definitions of the family. They do not share the traditional and normative conventions and definitions as laid down by heterosexual society.

The research demonstrates that many parents had to dispense with traditional definitions of "family". They had to actively assume the lead in deciding how issues and concerns, which transcend the family, related to their children and in approaching parents' social support networks. Much of this was achieved without prior guidance from the wider society too. Many of the parents who did not alter their negative attitudes and responses to their children's sexuality, had to actively decide how they might change their behaviour towards their children, even if their attitudes remained negative. In response, individual children actively decided which aspects of the family schema they continued to adhere to, or whether they should redefine it in a manner more conducive to their identities. We have already seen how individuals shift definitions of who is part of their families to suit their needs for intimacy and support. Weeks et al. (1999) argue that individual creativity has assumed importance as relations and identities become more fluid and negotiated in the postmodern world. Individual creativity is of particular importance to lesbians and gays whom must construct their worlds and identities outside of the framework of normative heterosexual definitions of relationships.

Creating families and forming new attachments through individual choice, according to Weeks et al. (1999), represent new senses of belonging which validate personal identities. These new forms of relationship construction and building represent democratic autonomy

for individuals (Weeks 1998). The economic and cultural changes of the last thirty years have tended to emphasise the autonomy and independence of the individual. Social liberalism in the 1990s has undermined social authoritarianism and allowed individuals and groups more freedom to construct their personal and social identities. Weeks (1999) argues that the focus of the autonomous individual constructing and negotiating relations and identities demonstrates that, in the postmodern world, the unitary self declines. When the unitary self declines, individuals face questions concerning how they construct a meaningful life. This is similar to Plummer (1995), who argues that individual identity construction does not mean the disappearance of our sense of self. It means recognising that the task of creating narratives and identities to cover all facets of our lives is a process of self-invention and negotiation.

Self-invention and individualisation are also focused on in the work of Gibbins and Reimer (1999). Individuals have to respond to a plethora of identities and relationships as a result of increasing difference. The self no longer relies on, for instance, the family or the church, for its socialisation. Rather, the postmodernisation of society creates different localities and pluralities from which individuals can create their own identities. The following quote is typical of this view.

> The production, reproduction and consumption of self-narratives has blossomed in a way and to an extent that was previously unimaginable, witnessed in the thousands of items available on the shelves of every newsagent and within the covers of most of these products. Through this enlargement of sources of the self, the very possibility of mass self-production, reproduction and consumption is diminishing, whether at the level of class, gender, the national or the international (Gibbins and Reimer 1999: 57).

Gibbins and Reimer (1999) are asserting then that individuals actively construct their identities. They are aware of this and choose aspects of others and the social world, which is more conducive to their chosen identities. Individualisation means identities are disembedded from traditional and structured processes of identity production. Individuals perceive what is available and accessible and assume identities from this basis. This process leads to the "expressive self" (Gibbins and Reimer 1999). The old conventional identities are done away

with and individuals use and relate to different sources of identity construction. Expressivism means individuals can be who they want to be and use this as a basis for identity formation. Respondents in my research, for example, chose whom to disclose to and whom they continue relationships with on the basis of their reactions to disclosure.

The research shows that respondents also began to express renewed confidence in their identities, as they became more positive towards their lesbian and gay identities, no matter how parental reactions developed. Respondents and many of their parents showed individual expressivism in their capacity to adapt to changing contexts and individuals and mould these changes into their sexual and familial identities. Gibbins and Reimer (1999) agree with Beck (1992) when they assert that the individual construction of personal and social identities require change, less security and risk. Individuals merge change with a degree of risk when constructing personal identities and negotiating them with others. The research demonstrates, as seen in Chapters 3 and 4, that respondents are ready to risk certain changes in familial relations as a result of feeling more comfortable with and positive about their sexual identities. They are ready to risk disclosure and negative parental reactions. Many were ready to risk breakdowns in relationships with parents in return for more comfortability with their personal identities.

This is similar to Giddens (1984) concept of a "reflexive self". The creation of social identity is a continuous process of personal construction. Personal choice becomes a defining point in an individual's life. As a result, Gibbins and Reimer (1999) argue that individuals can choose to construct "expressivist lifestyles". Lifestyles are choices individuals make concerning their lives, for example, where they live, how they relate to others or whom they have sexual relationships with. Lifestyles are also visible in that they are presented to others as being representations of individuals. A lifestyle is created which is conducive to the personal identity. Although there is no automatic relationship between lifestyle and identity, Gibbins and Reimer (1999) argue that people try to express who they are through lifestyles. This research brings to light how some respondents chose to break ties with the immediate family and form chosen families. Most chose whom to disclose to according to circumstance and personal preference. Similarly, parents began to attend parents' groups. As they became more positive, they began to attend the lesbian and gay commercial scene and provide social and psychological support and advice to later parents attending the parents' groups. Again,

identities, relationships and lifestyles are not linear, but individuals continuously construct and alter them as active strategists.

To conclude, Cheal (1991) argues that it is too difficult to fit all the different sequences of familial arrangements and individuals' experiences neatly into a set of stages. I think that family life cycle theory is also limited to a focus on heterosexual families and the "normal" family. The existence of lesbians and gays within families, disclosure and the processes of negotiating sexual and familial identities is either ignored or not seen as a possible stage of a "normal" heterosexual family. We need to allow for wider diversity. Elder (1984) suggests that we adopt the "individual" as the starting point in exploring familial relationships as opposed to "family". As Cheal (1991) asserts, individuals can be followed across time as they begin constructing and building on familial relationships. Individuals pass through different sequences of social situations. Individuals must make sense of these situations and the others involved and work out a response. Individuals pass through pathways (Cheal 1991; Bernardes 1997). Passages from one situation to another are seen as transitions. For example, some parents in this research made the transition from negative reactions to disclosure to acceptance. A focus upon the individual now leads me to consider that family relations and identities are constructed through discourses and social practices.

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS ARE CONSTRUCTED THROUGH DISCOURSES AND SOCIAL PRACTICES

McNamme (1996) points out that an expansion of technological capabilities has had an impact on contemporary identity construction in postmodernity. For example, television, radio and magazines provide for a number of different influences on identity formation and construction. Technology expands a wider array of identities. It provides us with the representations and identities of different groups and individuals based on, for example, ethnicities, genders, classes and sexualities. As a result of the expansion in technological development, a wider variety of interests, cultures, lifestyles and communities are available to influence the formation of identities and our responses to them. We are able to see "others" and respond to them. Possible forms and means of relating to each other expand. As Lyon (1999) asserts, in the postmodern world, there are a variety of voices as a result of the expansion of technological capabilities. Individuals' experiences can no longer be captured within a unitary framework.

Similarly, McNamee (1996) in her discussion of the social construction of therapy, also agrees with Bakhtin (1984) that we should consider relationships as "dialogic". The self and its relations to other individuals come into being through conversation. Representations and attitudes of others are located in the self. Nevertheless, our views of the self and others can alter as a result of entering into different relationships with a whole host of others. Neither meaning nor the self constitutes a precondition for interaction between individuals. The self and our perceptions of others come into being within conversation and interaction between individuals. Identities and meanings emerge within the relationship in which language, conversation and interaction take place. As Sampson (1993) points out, the categories and experiences by which we understand the world derive from that dialogig process, the relationship between the self and other individuals. Individuals have access to a variety of discourses and conversations due to the expansion of the media, technology and changing values and ideologies. This entails that we must recognise, aim to understand and interact within an array of conversations and relationships. McNamee (1996) argues for a postmodernist approach that will focus on the various ways of talking that construct our social worlds.

Self-narratives (Gergen and Gergen 1988) refer to the individual's account of the relationship among self-relevant events in which individuals attempt to develop coherent connections between life events and relationships. Narratives are social constructions, which undergo consistent change through interaction with others to maintain, enhance or prevent various actions. They are symbolic systems employed for such actions as appraisal, criticism and learning. This is similar to Harre (1983) who argues that conversation is the main means through which individuals exchange information and present their identities to others. Conversation is the "primary structure" through which identities and relationships are constructed. All interaction is conducted through the "expressive order", whereby autonomous and responsible individuals use practices, rules and conventions to construct everyday activities and give meaning to them. Others respond to this and hold individuals to account for their actions. Individuals rely on the context of the interactions and their knowledge of others. Each individual develops his or her own identity, but how this is expressed or altered is contingent upon the relationship with others. For example, Sean, an unemployed teenager from London, had developed a positive gay identity but felt that he could not express it as much as he would like to his parents, because he was still unsure at times as to their reactions.

> Sometimes, when I go through the mad spasm of wearing the leather tops, I can't do that in front of my parents. I wouldn't do that to them because that's like me turning around and throwing my sexuality at them. It's not the clothes I'm wearing. It's like throwing my sexuality into my parents faces. I can't keep throwing it into their faces. There's more problems out there than just sexuality. I found that if I keep throwing my sexuality into people's faces, I kept loosing those people instead of gaining them. If I just be myself and they turn around and ask me a question, I can say it and then change the subject. I play it (being gay) down in my family a lot. I've found that I've got to respect their wishes. I've left their home. It's theirs. I can go back when I want to. When I'm out on the street I can do as I want because I'm not in their environment. I've just got to play it safe, mainly.

Individuals are able to relate to others because they can talk to themselves and have "inner conversations" with themselves (Penn and Frankfurt 1994). Interaction moves back and forth from inner conversation to "conversation with others". Relationships become "participant texts", voices which are often newly discovered, invented and expand an individual's capacity to relate to new people and identities. The single voice and personal identity is invited into conversation through interaction. This interaction with others provokes further internal dialogue with the self, which influence change in perceptions and understandings as a result. As Jane, a former president of a university's lesbian, gay and bisexual society, commented, when talking about her mother's changing reactions to her disclosure.

> Time just time changed her, just talking to her friends. I think that helped a lot. The fact that my father was OK helped; the fact that he planted the idea in her head by saying "You know we are going to have to get another bed or tidy those rooms if the girls are going to have their boyfriends or girlfriends over". He kind of put that idea there. She admitted that kind of got her thinking. Being gay was something that was always mentioned in the family. It was never pushed out. So I think that for me, the fact that I knew there was such things as lesbianism, and that it did exist, helped me to come to terms with my own sexuality. Therefore, mum had to step back on that and think, "Well, yes I told her about this. It was OK then, so why is it not OK now?"

Knowledge and identities are constructed through relationships, not as a unitary truth. Changes in attitudes and ideas are the result of dialogue and the sharing of experience and discourse. For example, my research demonstrates that parents can promote inner dialogue within themselves. Parents who are initially negative may promote inner dialogue between the present view and voice of themselves as parents who no longer understand their children and the voice of the past when parents felt relationships to be satisfactory before disclosure. If the past voice is emphasised and confirmed, parents can come to perceive that they need closeness with their children again and what is required to achieve this. As a result, the outer dialogue between parents and children will alter. "Negative monologues" (Penn and Frankfurt 1994) can be altered as parents reply to themselves through experiencing the voices of others with whom they enter into specific relationships. Conversation with others can change and new relationships and perceptions arise because different discourses and perceptions exist within different relationships. Frequently parents assume what Penn and Frankfurt (1994) refer to as fixed and constricting inner narratives. They are single voices, perceived as unchangeable and closed truths. They listen to themselves and remain unresponsive to the narratives of others. However, monological narratives become more future orientated and likely to change as they enter multiple voiced relationships and activities. They enter the experiences of others.

Gergen's (1996) view is similar to that of McNamee (1996) and Penn and Frankfurt (1994), when he asserts that we no longer live within the fixed boundaries of, for instance, a single geographical area or even a single culture. Rather, we are immersed in different vocabularies, understandings and ways and means of relating to each other. For example, my research brings to light how sexual and familial identities emerge and how the parents and children involved respond to them. Various individuals and groups are exposed to different vocabularies and identities that arise in certain contexts. When exposed to these, they can be negotiated with and even changed from the old traditional usage to new ones that are more appropriate to the situation. For example, parents must respond to new identities and individuals such as their children's same-sex partners after disclosure. As Elena, mother of Scott, commented,

> We are not a heterosexual family anymore. We say we are down as gay friendly. We are half and half. We can't be a gay family because we've got a straight daughter and grandsons. We're half and half. But it's made no difference.

Children must also learn to cope with their parent's reactions to their being gay or lesbian. Understandings of and meanings imputed to families, identities and relationships for both the parents and their children emerge through interactions and communications with one another. Relationships and identities become spatial (Kumar 1995). The postmodern world creates identities and relationships, which are de-centered. Relationships cannot be perceived as temporal or fixed. They are constantly being invented and remade through interaction with others. There is no linear development or maturation of relationships. Relationships are constantly in the process of construction and negotiation.

Interaction, discourse and change are clearly seen in the work of Gubrium and Holstein (1990) who refer to familial disourses. These are, for instance, ideas and stocks of knowledge that each person carries around concerning what family relations are, who is part of the family, how family relations should proceed and what others expect from one another. Familial discourse is used to make sense of situations and in planning responses to others across varied contexts of everyday life. Family discourse provides a way of making sense of and organising social relations, which confer familial meaning. The "family" is more a discursive project.

> As a social construct, family does not simply emerge as a description of inherently meaningful domestic circumstances. Rather it is a resource, a concept, image or metaphor to be used for responding to interpretive challenges regarding the status and meaning of social bonds. (Holstein and Gubrium 1994: 237)

For example, the research demonstrates that some lesbians define their female partners and children as being more like family than their biological parents are. This was as a result of having parents who remained negative about their lesbianism, their partners and their children. Family meaning comes into practical view when social relations come into

question, for example, closeness and sentimentality (Holstein and Gubrium 1994). As Salli, a dental assistant from Sheffield, who lives with her partner and child, explained,

> I'm very happy for the first time in my life. I'm with a partner. I have a son. They have a bigger impact on my life than anybody else in the world. My partner helps me to contradict the bad side of my (biological) family. If I have to say who is most important, it would be them, my "family", who are my partner, my son, my sister-in-law and her children, and my best friends. As for my mum and dad, they are my old family. I've grown up. I've built my own family, a new way of living. My family now is my adult family, as opposed to my childhood family. However, my family now does include some of my blood relatives. My sister-in-law will often say, "We are starting something new here". It is a new family culture, really.

Whether an individual labels another person or group as "family" is contextually grounded, constructed through relationships. Meaning is responsive to context. Individuals redefine family, founded on choice, personal preference and experience, as opposed to biology. Individual definitions of family can be a process that alters. Many respondents responded to eroding closeness with their biological families by replacing it with the construction of another. Andrew, a chemist from Manchester, explained that friends would have replaced his blood family as his main source of support, if his blood family had been negative towards his sexuality.

> The reason I told my family that I was gay was because I had made a network of friends first. I needed them as safety net. So if it went bad, I had people to fall upon. My friends are important. If my family weren't accepting, my friends would be the most important. So if they had have stopped me from going on the scene or weren't accepting, I would have come out anyway.

The family is an object to be claimed and contested. It is a process continually constructed and reconstructed (Holstein and Gubrium 1994). My research captures this change at a specific point in time and context. There is no longer a single version of family reality as is the case with systems theory. Constructing the family is a practical accomplishment where members of the family can apply certain familial categories to

different individuals. Beck refers to this as "reflexive modernisation". This has created the "negotiated provisional family". Individuals construct family life and relations according to their requirements and how they perceive the needs of others. They are less guided by traditions or conventional patterns of relations. As Silva and Smart (1999) point out, the identification of, for instance, friends as family, is no longer perceived as a pathology. It reflects how subjective meanings associated with the family are shifting and how individuals change definitions of intimacy away from "biological" kin to others. Weeks et al. (1999) refer to alternative definitions as "families of choice". Changes in attitudes towards lesbians and gays, along with the development of complex cultural patterns of relations have allowed non-heterosexuals to live in ways that were not possible before. It represents a pluralisation of society. All forms of social identity are opened up to negotiation. Giddens (1992) asserts, we have witnessed a "transformation of intimacy" whereby individuals experiment with how they live and create "pure relationships" founded upon democratic negotiation and renegotiation. Identities can stabilise but they can also alter. Intimate relationships become a substantial part of our everyday personal identities.

Familial discourse is not only created and acted on within the family, but can derive and change from outside the family. This is a result of individuals' capacity to contribute to and change existing relationships in postmodernity. People come into contact with a variety of overlapping communities and identities. The information and experience gained as a result are employed to change existing contexts. The reflexive self (Giddens 1984) is disembedded from traditional relationships and is influenced by new information and ways of relating to others. For example, my research shows that many parents learnt a new means of responding to their children's disclosure and physical sexual relations through obtaining other interpretations by attending parental support groups. This is an example of how these family discourses can be modified in interaction with others and in response to various challenges. Individuals' personal views can be affected by what occurs in public and outside of families. As Gubrium and Holstein (1990) assert, the family does not exist as a distinct definable object. Individuals practice family description and construct family meanings. Understanding emerges from commonplace interactions and communications with one another. However, much of this understanding and meaning emerges from categories and concepts that are available to individuals as a result of interaction in other areas beyond the family. As Weeks (1998) asserts, identities and relations are a phenomenon that we create ourselves. Potential

reformulation of concepts and identities are possible. This does not mean that the self does not exist, or that it is not experienced as "real", but that we must invent it.

The research further alerts us to see that family discourse can be altered and modified when we consider parents and their children can alter the way they perceive each other following disclosure. Parents can alter perceptions of their children's same-sex partner, for example, by accepting them as in-laws. Children can alter their perceptions of their parents. Daniel, a teenage information technology worker from Nottingham explained how his views of his parents had altered throughout the coming out process, as his mother changed from negative to positive, but his father remained negative.

> Mum's a lot more open and caring now than I've given her credit for. But she turned into this straight authoritarian woman when I first came out. Now she's a lot more understanding and more dependent on me. She had to admit she needed help to get through this. She had to swallow her pride and admit that she needed help from someone else. I wasn't particularly close to dad beforehand. I knew he was selfish. Now I just see him as a stranger. But mum's progressed a hell of a lot further.

As Shotter and Gergen (1994) argue, reality is contingent, indeterminate and relies on continuous interaction between individuals. Groups can communicate on the basis of, for instance, traditions and fixed perceptions of one another, but different and "unpredictable" circumstances means that communication has to transcend the scope and limits of fixed perceptions. Interactions and perceptions are not so much the actions of single individuals. It is the nature of dialogic and discursive activity among individuals, which change traditions and perceptions, allowing old ones to be abandoned.

Similarly, Bruner (1995) points out, that we experience the social world because we understand it within a variety of ways. Interaction acquires and forms meanings as others respond to it. For example, many parents did not so much alter negative reactions through pre-existing knowledge or understanding. Instead, they actively constructed a shared understanding with their children appropriate to the changed context. This creates the potential for further discourse and interaction between parents and children. However, the research suggests that the reverse can be true and some parents can remain negative towards

their children's sexual identities. For example, Shottter and Gergen (1994) assert that what an individual is capable of doing and being is reliant upon other people around them. Since there are different means of responding to an individual's identity, it is possible that it can be negated, for instance, those parents who retained negative responses to their children's sexuality. Possibilities for parents to try and accept their children's sexuality were limited, as were the children's means of influencing them to evoke a change. As individuals coordinate their activities and relationships, different discourses and potential possibilities for constructing activities confront them. There is then always space for negotiation and responses.

The idea that discourse and relationships are changeable is evident in Shotter and Gergen's (1994) idea of "ideological horizons". These are conversations, ideologies and discourses that fix perceptions and social actions to the exclusion of others. Chapter 4 argued that heterosexuality is perceived as an integral part of an individual's personal identity (Richardson 1996). "Hegemonic heterosexuality" stigmatises non-heterosexuals as "wrong" or "abnormal" (Van Every 1996). The research demonstrates that many parents continued to adhere to these ideological horizons, that non-heterosexuality was not appropriate. Hence, many parents found difficulty in trying to resist old usages and construct new perceptions of sexuality. Andrew, a chemist from Manchester, explained, that his parents could not equate gay partnerships with heterosexual ones.

> There are things my parents will never come to terms with, which as a gay man, I don't have trouble with. They would have trouble with me having a commitment ceremony with my partner. They see my partnership with my boyfriend as good but they haven't come to terms with the fact that it's the same as theirs. They see it as valid but different. They don't feel that gay men would want to do this with one another. We see moving in together as a possibility. They have a problem with that. They see us as a partnership because they see us together. But they never see us in the same terms as a heterosexual man and wife. Mum has a feeling that I'm going to be alone because I'm not married. She always says, "Make sure you have a good set of friends. Make sure you have money as you won't' have a joint income like your father and I have". So there are still sticking points. She would have problems with us having a child.

Nevertheless, other parents were successful in changing old perceptions of their lesbian and gay children. Traditions, meanings and ideologies are open to change (Billig et al. 1988). Terry, a health worker, working with lesbians and gays in Nottingham, commented on how his parents' views of lesbians and gays had changed, even though his father coped by denying his sexuality.

> They see gays as people. They are aware that there is actually a very broad spectrum. They are more aware of political and social prejudices. There's been a normalising process. I brought it closer to home. A gay person is no longer somebody out there who they don't know, who they can invent characteristics for. It's somebody they know. They have more of an understanding of what it means to grow up gay. There's still the theological tensions however.

Again, these changes in interactions, interpretations and understandings cannot easily be captured by developmental and stage models mentioned in Chapter 1. Cass (1979) argues that as part of identity comparison, if lesbians and gays negatively evaluate their self-images, they can devalue them and positively assert heterosexual orientations. If they cannot reassert a heterosexual orientation, the negative self-image is accepted. This can lead to, for instance, self-hatred. However, Cass (1979) does not expand on the contexts and relationships, for example, within the family, which can influence positive or negative self-evaluations. The construction of a lesbian or gay identity cannot be seen in isolation from our interpretations and reactions to these contexts and relations (Eliason 1996a). As we have seen, even when parents remained negative about their children's lesbian and gay identities, there were other possibilities for children to respond to and cope with these presently fixed perceptions. Negative experiences do not automatically lead to negative outcomes for children, although this can be one outcome.

As Anna-Maria explains in Chapter 4, despite having negative parents, she was able to construct a positive identity. She believed that negative experiences had made her stronger and less likely to make the same mistakes as her parents in her relations with others. Identity construction is more complex than stage models suggest when we account for different contexts and relations and how they might affect our reactions to them. As Shotter and Gergen (1994) maintain, the course of conversation and dialogue is likely to change accordingly and future interaction is likely to be influenced or updated by what has gone

before. We have more space in terms of negotiation and how we proceed to consume the new choices.

We are also alerted to change by Giddens (1999), who focuses on the fluid negotiations of relationships in his discussion of a "democracy of emotions". This is where individuals constantly work to build mutual relationships to fit changing circumstances, as opposed to standardised and fixed relationships. For example, the traditional parent-child relationship of children submitting to the authority of parents is now negotiated based on the needs of parents and children. Individuals constantly search for satisfactory relationships as a means to attaining a sense of personal affirmation. Personal narratives and relationships are constructed around concepts of intimacy as a means of forming identities we can be comfortable with. Traditional cultural and economic factors and discourses are no longer the key to maintaining relationships. Rather, these are replaced by intimacy as the central means of retaining a relationship. This research demonstrates that in a democracy of emotions, members of the family construct different types and levels of relationships at a given time. Some individuals do not experience these relationships as of benefit. The construction of relationships and identities within a democracy of emotions does involve conflict. Some relationships do not always fulfil the personal and emotional requirements of certain individuals. Nevertheless, they can provide a springboard for development and change. Familial and sexual identities do coexist. This coexistence is a discursive project whereby family members create and negotiate identities, whilst drawing on existing knowledge in order to construct other identities. The situation is understood and experienced according to context and meaning (Bruner 1995).

Giddens (1992; 1999) also argues that the traditional family of the heterosexual man and wife, living with their dependent children was a transitional development in the 1950s. The character of relationships within families has changed. For example, even the meaning of marriage has changed for most individuals. It is not the only definition of coupledom. Relationships and identities within families also hold different meanings for different individuals. Marriage is as much to do with the search for "pure relationships" in which people form relationships to gain a sense of security in a changing world. In the traditional family, children were raised for economic benefit. In contemporary societies, whether individuals have children are now influenced by psychological and emotional needs as much as financial needs. Relationships in marriage are now more likely to be influenced by

emotional communication and constructed and negotiated around intimacy (Giddens 1999). Dialogue, conversation, talk and interaction are the foundations of relationships, not recourse to tradition or standard practice. The freedom to construct relationships has opened up new ways of relating to one other. Relationships are evaluated on the basis of how they benefit individuals. As Derek, a local authority worker from Leicester, commented when talking of his relationship with his parents; reticence about his sexuality was to the benefit of them all, if it allowed them to maintain relationships. What was important to Derek was that they knew about his sexuality.

> The less mum knows, the better. If I don't say anything, there's no offence or harm done. She respects I have a life of my own. I don't ask her about hers. I talk about gay friends, but there are limits. It actually makes it a bit easier for me. If I don't have to talk about it, it's better. Dad wanted to know less. But that hasn't affected me. It's always been like that. He never wanted to know. That suited me because I never want him to know about my sexuality. I wanted acceptance but couldn't do anything to bring it about. If I'd have tried it would have alienated him more.

At the same time, individuals discover new ways of responding to and coping with changed relations (Beck 1992; Beck-Gernsheim 1998). As Giddens (1991) suggests the constructed nature of pure relationships also lends itself to risk due to the breakdown of traditional norms.

Pure relationships, according to Giddens (1991), also characterise parent-child relationships as well as marriage. Relationships between parent and child are also democratised in what is referred to as "democratic parenting". Parents and children self-reflexively and consciously work to sustain relationships and a sense of who they are through considering what each individual wants. They become more self-aware and emphasise the need for self-affirming relationships. This makes it possible for individuals to reach new depths of knowledge and understanding. Parents and children discover needs through interaction. The parent-child relationship is characterised by mutual disclosure of each other's needs. Similarly, Skolnick (1992) has considered that all relationships are characterised by awareness that there are different means of constructing relationships. The democratisation of personhood means that people claim a right to be heard in personal and

social relationships. Anderson (1980), Finch (1989) and Skolnick (1991) all agree that parent-child relationships are now subject to change and negotiation. Finch (1989) argues that family-obligations between parents and children are contingent upon material circumstances and the quality of relationships. Each generation of children are seeking more individualism to determine their own way in life and construct their own identities, less related to families. Families have lost their traditional authority. There are less rules and guidelines to determine relationships with children. Hutson and Jenkins (1989) and Allat and Yeandle (1992) point out that intimacy between parents and their children is highly variable, depending on time and context. Emerging independence of children and lack of traditional guidelines means that parental responsibilities and roles must be constantly negotiated and adjusted.

Central to the argument about the social construction of pure relationships is the idea of trust (Giddens 1991). Institutions must gain trust for the technical knowledge, which they produce. Individuals faced with change, anxiety and risk must also search for trust in their relationships with others. In both cases, trust must be continually sought and negotiated. Parents must learn to trust others in the parents' groups who share their knowledge of coping with disclosure. Children must trust that the groups will sufficiently equip parents with the knowledge so that they can remain intermediaries in the coping process. Trust is important for a sense of ontological security (Giddens 1990), a need to feel comfortable with one's identity and surroundings to lessen anxiety. Trust may result from reflexive calculation or the decision to put trust in an institution or individual. The result is a lessening of feelings of vulnerability and gives a sense that we can cope with increased choices and risks.

Couples now form and construct relationships on the basis of intimacy leading to more risks. Individuals from other cultures and backgrounds also form relationships with others from different backgrounds (Beck-Gernsheim 1998). Lesbians and gays disclose their sexualities to other family members, who then have to take risks, make judgments and construct different relationships, attitudes and identities. Weeks (1998) argues that democratic and egalitarian relationships have become a measure by which individuals have to judge their lives. Relationships are opened up to personal choice and risk, as opposed to tradition and conventional attitudes. Individuals maintain relationships so long as they fulfill their needs and are conducive to their personal identities.

Conversation, narratives and relationships are also important to Plummer (1995) when he asserts that the telling of stories is a core element in the construction and negotiation of familial and sexual identities and relationships. Each story tells us about how one person or another experienced relationships and events at a given time and context. Individuals then respond to these stories by telling other stories. They redefine meanings or change attitudes, but also express that they have achieved this through the telling of stories. Narratives and conversations are influenced by those of others, but succeeding narratives, which were the result of past influences on narratives, can alter the picture. Plummer (1995) argues that the new language and narratives concerning the self, the family, relationships and sexualities provide the context for the emergence of sexual citizenship, a desire for social inclusion and autonomy. The relationships and identities constructed and negotiated by lesbians and gays and their parents pose questions as to, for example, how far respondents construct their personal identities by including aspects of familial identities. It also poses questions as to how far parents should encroach upon their children's personal and sexual identities so as to construct all inclusive familial identities and relationships, which involve both parents and their children.

The research clearly indicates that individuals within families can no longer rely on economic security, legal discourse or tradition to maintain relationships. Individuals do not experience or understand family relationships solely with reference to, for example, socialisation and preparation for their "role" in later life (Parsons 1964). Instead, they perceive them within the framework of negotiation and choice. The former ascribed familial identities no longer thoroughly incorporate how many of us choose to live our lives. How can individuals subscribe to the old traditions of heterosexual "courtship" and marriage, when at a particular point of their lives, they identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual? Individual choice and the acceptance of diversity are central to successful relations. Finch (1989) argues that family ties remain central to individuals' identities and relationships. However, family relationships are the product of negotiating obligations and commitments between "blood" relatives. The distinction between family relations and relations between friends are now lessening.

To conclude, families create relationships through interaction, influenced by one another's self-narratives and stories and family discourses. Individuals can face similar situations throughout their lives, but can come to these experiences from quite different

backgrounds and respond to them quite differently (Morgan 1990; Bernardes 1997). Cheal (1999) asserts that postmodernism will not necessarily create total reorganisation and standardisation of family relationships. Instead, family relationships are always in the process of continuous production and negotiation. There are no set patterns. Thirdly, I discuss how wider contexts and culture beyond the family affects the construction of familial and sexual identities.

IDENTITIES AND RELATIONSHIPS ARE CONSTRUCTED WITHIN CULTURAL CONTEXTS AND DISCOURSES BEYOND THE FAMILY

Lash (1994) argues that in "simple modernity", individuals, so to speak, knew their position within the social structure, depending on, for example, their gender or familial role. However, these roles dissolve and are replaced by new relationships and contexts such as leisure, and the economy. Experiences and perceptions are moulded by different social and cultural contexts (Cheal 1999). Gubrium and Holstein (1994) argue that the postmodern self is influenced by increased broader contexts and locations in which identities and relationships are constructed. Gubrium and Holstein point out that these can be "courtrooms", "psychiatric hospitals" through to "self-improvement courses", "support groups" and "counsellors". Postmodernism is about examining how individuals create identities, relationships and experiences with others within these changing and broader locations. The postmodern self is fluid, reflexive and able to negotiate and construct relations and identities with others, but much of this diversity is created within larger socially organised and regularised locations, cultures and contexts. Families, sexualities, culture and social attitudes, I would argue, constitute some of these locations and organisations. For example, Giddens (1999) explains that attitudes towards same-sex sexual behaviour change as a result of the cultural severance of sexuality from reproduction.

This is consistent with Morgan (1999), who argues that family practices can come to resemble social and historical regularities, which come to represent everyday taken-for-granted knowledge. The construction and representation of narratives and relationships are embedded with the sociohistorical context (Gergen and Gergen 1988). Culture and discourse beyond the family influence construction and interpretation. Nevertheless, these cultural understandings can be utilised and altered within the context of the interaction between individuals. Some lesbians and gays initially react to disclosure to themselves with fear as a

result of cultural stereotypes; but as a result of forming relationships with other lesbians and gays, these stereotypes lessen their hold. Some parents initially respond with fear and shame as they realise that their children may not participate in heterosexual rituals like marriage, which validate relationships within families. Yet parents can learn to modify these cultural understandings to develop "positive ontologies" (Shotter and Gergen 1994) with their children. Whilst we construct and negotiate different relationships and identities, the dynamics are influenced by other individuals and procedures beyond the family through which we come into contact. These practices and cultures, however, are also likely to change as individuals continue to construct and negotiate identities and relationships. Respondents and the parents who chose to, also have to explore and learn about the lesbian and gay communities. Weeks (1996) argues that the creation of lesbian and gay communities helped foster growing awareness of lesbians and gays. The research shows that the construction of lesbian, gay, and familial identities were affected by these contexts. For example, when parents explored the lesbian and gay communities, they became more knowledgeable of their children's lifestyles and more accepting.

That parents and their children can proceed to construct positive ontologies demonstrates that the construction of lesbian, gay and familial identities is more complex than suggested by, for instance, Fernbach (1981) and D'Emilio (1983). Individuals actively construct and negotiate identities within different contexts of culture and shared meanings, as opposed to fixed relationships (Richardson 1984; Laird 1993). However, local contexts and stocks of knowledge not only influence the construction of personal and social identities, but can also be utilized and altered within social interaction. As Gubrium and Holstein (1994) assert, we can recognise how identities are constructed and negotiated, but also locate this diversity within socially organised circumstances. Cultural stereotypes of lesbians and gays beyond the family and the lesbian and gay communities are socially organised circumstances, which influence and impinge upon the construction of sexual and familial identities within families. As Morgan (1996) reports, they can cause tension between different and conflicting family practices. Nevertheless, these contexts exist and exercise influence only insofar as they are continually and discursively produced within interaction. Dean, an English teacher from Leicester, commented on how stereotypes and cultural prohibitions against sexual activity between men impinged on his relationship with his largely accepting father. As was mentioned in Chapter 4, such cultural stereotypes and understandings are less easily modified and affect interaction between individuals.

> When my partner came on the scene, my father made it plainly obvious at times, that he did not like to see men kissing. So therefore, it was a case of we didn't kiss in front of my father. And there was a time when that was OK. I respected him for it. But a bit later on, I thought, "Well, look, it's been two years now. I don't feel you should have problems with this anymore". I started to push boundaries back a bit, just to try and say, "You've had time now". Everything else seemed OK, and there comes a point when you just sort of say, "If everything else is OK, then it's time. You're attitude has been coloured by society, so it's time for society's attitudes to start changing your attitudes again. The society that you're in at the moment has got gay people in, so therefore, you've got to start to live with the fact that there are men out there kissing each other. Yes, it's your house, but we can bring it in little by little". Dad's learned to live with it. There are times when it irritates him. It's only because when he was growing up, everybody told him that it was a rotten thing to happen.

McNamee (1996) and Gergen (1996) are in agreement with Gubrium and Holstein (1994) when they argue that meanings emerge as individuals' actions are supplemented by others' actions. Forms of action, meanings and supplementations are dependent on the social context of relationships, their histories and the cultures and communities of the participants involved. For example, the research demonstrates the views and perceptions that parents have of lesbians and gays before and after disclosure. It also explores how parental identities are influenced by a child's involvement in, for example, the lesbian and gay communities, as they proceed to construct relationships around these events. Identities are invariably created in conversation and negotiation within the family. But this conversation, argues McNamee, (1996) is culturally and historically specific. Identities and relationships are not the possession of self-contained individuals. They are cultural and contextual processes. Influences come from beyond the family as much as from within.

Similarly, Weeks (1998) argues that relationships and identities within the family have been both detraditionalised and democratised as a result of vast economic, social and cultural changes that have taken place on a global scale. These changes are challenging the traditional forms of authority, for instance, familial conventions, religion and the state.

> There has been a profound destabilization in the balance of relationships that the family is supposed to represent. (Weeks 1998: 41)

For example, traditional gender binaries and distinctions between men and women have been strongly challenged by economic and cultural changes and by the impact of the feminist movement on society. At the same time, the lesbian and gay movement has risen and challenged the traditional binary opposition between "heterosexuals" and "homosexuals", which was believed to be natural and unchangeable. Sexual identities are now socially constructed and malleable. Legitimate sexual identities no longer have to be linked to concepts of "natural" heterosexuality and the family. The relationship between adult and child has also become subject to negotiation and renegotiation as new discourses of relationships emerge as a result of cultural and material change. Weeks (1998) argues that these changes create new patterns of intimacy. Changing contexts feed themselves into the construction of relationships and identities. As we have previously seen, Beck-Gernsheim (1998) sees historical, economic and cultural change as impinging on family life, encouraging individuals to adapt.

This is similar to Plummer (1995) who argues that these changes have allowed individuals to "tell their new stories" in a world which is bound together through the telling of stories and the construction of narratives. These changes provide both the opportunities and the language to tell these stories. The research shows that changes in, for instance, attitudes to lesbians and gays, the development of parental support groups and the growth of lesbian and gay communities has allowed parents and their children to tell and explain their side of the story when children disclose their sexuality. New stories come into existence when new situations confront individuals and when there are new people to listen to and understand them through interpretive communities (Plummer 1995; Weeks 1998). The most common narratives are likely to derive from discriminated and disempowered individuals. Richardson (1998) also explores how culture and society contribute to shape sexual identities beyond the family. Cultural citizenship, she argues, is dependent upon identifying as heterosexual. Access to social and political rights is sexualised. For example, individuals who live outside the normative guidelines of the conventional heterosexual family are discriminated against. Lesbian and gay marriage and adoption is limited, if not forbidden. Lesbians and gays construct and negotiate their identities in a society where they are only entitled to partial rights. Citizenship of a community is usually defined as heterosexual

citizenship, where heterosexuals are granted more social, political and civil rights than lesbians and gays. Where lesbians and gays are given rights of citizenship, it is normally restricted to the private sphere, rather than the public. Lesbians and gays are perceived of as less of a legitimate social constituency.

That social identities and relationships are affected by culture and society is explored by Castells (1996). Global capitalism and the expansion of information technology give society instantaneous communication. This allows for the development of cultural networks. New identities and relationships can be constructed and mediated through the information and opportunities brought about by, for example, expanding technology, the media, consumer capitalism, and different public moods and tastes. Individuals come to interact with multiple signs, cultures and identities, which break down dominant and controlling traditions. The circulation of these images, identities and information function in spaces of flow (Castells 1996). Individuals can initiate and change these flows according to whether they can access them. The increase in communication, cultural symbols and ideologies also allows different social groups the ability to construct and express different identities, which resist conventional definitions. Relationships and identities become localised and deconstructed as different groups use expanding communication and cultural symbols to gain power and recognition of themselves. For Castells (1997) power is inscribed in local and plural cultural codes and discourse which can be expressed through a whole range of signs, technologies and individuals. For example, lesbian and gay identities can be expressed and validated through a plurality of locations, the lesbian and gay communities, socially defined and biological families, the media, the Internet, through to trade unions, political parties and pressure groups

Similarly, Penn and Frankfurt (1994) and Gibbins and Reimer (1999) argue that different contexts contain the potential to create different selves. Selves are constituted and reconstituted from resources at a particular time and space. Different stories, narratives and voices, argue Penn and Frankfurt (1994) change negative monologues and internal dialogues. If individuals find themselves in new relationships and contexts and find that previous attitudes of themselves and others are no longer conducive, they can change their conversation with others. The expansion of these new contexts and perceptions of selves and others raises important questions about their effects on personal identities.

Voices, meanings and narratives are constructed and negotiated within the family to accommodate new contexts and understandings, which have their sources from beyond. The parents' discovery of parents' groups, the lesbian and gay communities and their children's partners creates self-reflections inside and outside these contexts. Singular and unitary meanings turn into different meanings and experiences, evoking new knowledge, understandings and narratives. As Penn and Frankfurt (1994) believe, these changes in meanings and narratives do not just simplistically replace one another. Instead, they can initially exist side by side, in conflict or employed as a coping strategy before changing their responses towards their children. Gergen and Gergen (1988) also argue that words and self-narratives acquire communicative capacity by virtue of shared usage. In order for responses and identities to change, the research demonstrates that families construct a shared discourse, which is influenced by communities and social voices in the wider society. Gibbins and Reimer (1999) argue that the main change which postmodernity brings about is the change from following tradition to constructing reflexive relations through making decisions within the prevailing broader social and cultural context. Individuals make choices and decisions that make sense to them in their social and personal circumstances and in the knowledge which they gain from them. For example, as we have already seen, many parents react negatively to disclosure as a result of stereotypes of lesbians and gays. Many parents changed these negative reactions as a result of discovering different social contexts and discourses beyond the family. Finally, I shall end with a brief focus on recommendations for further research.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

On the basis of this current research, I shall now briefly outline some thoughts for further research, which could complement or extend future research into the social construction of lesbian, gay and familial identities and relationships.

- More long term research needs to be done concerning the relationships and identity developments between parents who failed to come to terms with their children's sexualities and the influences which might impinge on further change.

- Whilst this thesis contains a much needed focus upon parents, more research is needed concerning, for example, siblings and grandparents. As Strommen (1989) suggests, if siblings are the first to be disclosed to, this could be significant in influencing parental reactions. Grandparents may be significant too. Grandparents may have an effect on the reponses of both their children as parents and their grandchildren.

- The research could also be enriched by focusing on the construction and negotiation of sexual and familial identities with families of colour, as opposed to only white European families.

- Also, more research on how the present research could be applied to the work of counsellors or psychotherapists is merited. Whilst this research demonstrates a social constructionist, postmodernist analysis of sexual and familial identities and relationships, it could provide such people with information and support about appropriate ways to conduct, for instance, family therapy or the counselling of lesbian and gays. It informs us as to why some parents remain negative, but how some parents develop more positive reactions as relationships develop. Such information could prove to be valuable to the construction of therapies and counselling for lesbians and gays and their families.

APPENDIX A

Interview Guide for Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Respondents

A) Pre Coming Out

1. What was it like knowing that you were gay/lesbian, but that your parents didn't know

B) Coming Out

When did you first come out to your mother?
How did you first come out to your mother?
What did coming out to your mother mean to you?

How did your mother feel and react when you first came out?

What do you think influenced the reactions of your mother?

What were the ways, if any, did you try to influence the reactions of your mother?

How were you affected by the way in which your mother dealt with your coming out?

How close did you feel to your mother at this time?

How does she feel and react now that time has passed?

What issues, if any, did it bring up.

Did she want to know more?
Why?

How did she cope?
Why?

Did she feel she had to turn to others?
Why?

Did she keep in contact with you over this time?
Why?

CHANGE: Did she rely on you to cope with the change?
Why?

CHANGE: What do you think made her change?

NO CHANGE: Why do you think she has not changed?

Do you ever tell her about things, such as new partners?

Do you see her differently compared to how you did when you first came out?
Why?

Do you think she sees you differently now?
Why?

When did you first come out to your father?
How did you first come out to your father?
What did coming out to your father mean to you?

How did your father first feel and react when you first came out to him?

What do you think influenced the reactions of your father?

What were the ways, if any, did you try to influence the reactions of your father?

How were you affected by the way in which your father dealt with your coming out?

How close did you feel to your father at this time?

How does he feel and react now that time has passed?

What issues, if any, did it bring up?

Did he want to know more?
Why?

How did he cope?
Why?

Did he feel that he had to turn to others?
Why?

Did he keep in contact with you over this time?
Why?

CHANGE: Did he rely upon you to cope with the change?
Why?

CHANGE: What do you think made him change?

NO CHANGE: Why do you think he has not changed?

Do you ever tell him about things, such as new partners?

Do you see him differently compared to how you did when you first came out?

Do you think he sees you differently now?

Were there different reasons for telling different members of your family?
What, if anything, did you gain from coming out to members of your family?

C) Post Coming Out

Do you feel that you live your life as your parents want you to with regards to expectations and values?

How do you feel about this?

How do your family see homosexuality and gay people?

How do their views of homosexuality compare to your personal experiences of being gay?

Do you ever feel that you are in any way, different from your family?

Do you ever feel that you want to be different from your family?

How do you put across your need to be different from the rest of your family?

What are the means and ways of staying close to your family, if at all, this happens?

Do you feel that you have changed your family in any way, particularly its views on homosexuality?

How are you treated, as a gay person, at work or at college

Are things different here to how they are when you are with your family?

How are things different?

Do you ever attend gay clubs, pubs or activities?

How do you feel about your experiences with the people who also attend?

Are things different here to how they are in your family?

How are things different?

Is it necessary for you that you feel close to your family?

Do you ever feel that you cannot be the person you want to be within your family?

Would you ever let a member of your family stop you from meeting with other gay people?

What, if any, influences do your family have on the way you see yourself as a gay person?

APPENDIX B

QUESTIONNAIRE

This is a questionnaire mainly about your relationships with your parents. It is divided into two sections: Section A and Section B. Section A is concerned with your individual characteristics; and section B is a longer section, consisting of questions about your family and yourself.

Please ensure that you answer all the questions and bear in mind that there are no right or wrong answers. Each person, will, of course, differ. All information will be treated with confidentiality.

Section A: In order to answer the following questions, please circle the number which most applies to you and fill in any other applicable answer on the lines given.

1) What sex are you?

1) Male 2) Female

2) What is your highest level of education?

1) GCSE/ O- Levels 2) A- Levels 3) First Degree 4) Postgraduate Degree 5) Other _____

3) What age are you?

1) 15-18 2) 19-21 3) 22-25 4) 26-29 5) 30-33 6) 34-40 7) 40 and over

4) Are you presently in employment?

1) Yes 2) No

If yes: What is your current salary? _____

5) What is your ethnic origin?

1) Black Caribbean 2) Black African 3) Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi 4) Chinese 5) White 6) Other _____

Section B: Please read the following questions and circle the numbers which most apply to you.

6. At what age did you first become aware of your homosexual feelings?

1) 15-18 2) 19-21 3) 22-25 4) 26-29 5) 30-33 6) 34 and over

7. At what age did you first come out to your mother?

1) 15-18 2) 19-21 3) 22-25 4) 26-29 5) 30-33 6) 34 and over 7) not applicable

8. At what age did you first come out to your father?

1) 15-18 2) 19-21 3) 22-25 4) 26-29 5) 30-33 6) 34 and over 7) Not applicable

9. What was your mother's first reaction?

1) very positive 2) positive 3) can't decide 4) negative 5) very negative

10. What was your father's first reaction?

1) very positive 2) positive 3) can't decide 4) negative 5) very negative

11. How important is religion to your family?

1) very important 2) important 3) can't decide 4) quite important 5) not important

12. How important is marriage to your family?

1) very important 2) important 3) can't decide 4) quite important 5) not important

13. How important are children/grandchildren to your family?

1) very important 2) important 3) can't decide 4) quite important 5) not important

14. How close do you feel to your family now?

1) very close 2) quite close 3) can't decide 4) not very close 5) very distant

15. How does your mother view how boys and girls should behave?

1) boys should be very masculine; girls should be very feminine

2) boys should be quite masculine; girls should be quite feminine

3) boys do not need to be masculine; girls do not need to be feminine

4) boys should be quite feminine; girls should be quite masculine

16. How does your father view how boys and girls should behave?

1) boys should be very masculine; girls should be very feminine

2) boys should be quite masculine; girls should be quite feminine

3) boys do not need to be masculine; girls do not need to be feminine

4) boys should be quite feminine; girls should be quite masculine

17. How important are the following things to you? For this question, please rank them in order of importance. Number them from 1=most important, to 4=least important.

Being gay or lesbian ( )

Your family ( )

Your ethnicity ( )

Being a man or a woman ( )

18. How close do you feel to the people you meet on the gay and lesbian scene?

1) very close 2) quite close 3) can't decide 4) not very close 5) very distant 6) not applicable

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. All information which you have given will be treated with confidentiality.

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