Heterosexual Parents Who Move Toward Acceptance of Their Gay Sons

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Heterosexual Parents Who Move Towards Acceptance of Their Gay Sons

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A Dissertation Submitted to The Graduate School at the University of Missouri – St. Louis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Education with an emphasis in Counseling

December 2021

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ABSTRACT

Rejection of gay men by parents is a frequent occurrence. Rhoades et al. (2018) found 49% of a sample of 657 sexual minority children had experienced parental rejection due to their LGBTQ+ identity. However, the current body of literature does not discuss those heterosexual parents who initially reject their sexual minority children and then return to a place of acceptance. Within the framework of attachment theory, this dissertation used a basic qualitative approach, influenced by Grounded Theory methods, to investigate the experience of heterosexual parents who move toward acceptance of their gay son.

Fifteen, white, heterosexual parents, ranging from ages 51-70, from across the country, were interviewed. Results show that heterosexual parents of gay sons were able to move toward acceptance of their son by engaging in a process of self-work. Specific stages of acceptance that parents moved through were identified as well as the experiences, qualities, and beliefs that encouraged these parents to accept their son. The results of this study provide increased awareness of the barriers and catalysts that parents encounter as they move toward acceptance. The key themes discovered in this study grant clinicians the ability to identify the stage of acceptance that the heterosexual parent is in, and the current tasks that the parent must complete within that stage in order to enhance their level of acceptance. Family therapists can determine whether the issue with acceptance lies within an individual member or if the culture within the family, or the surrounding community has a negative impact.

Keywords: acceptance; gay men, sexual identity; religion; community; emotions; rejection; empathy; priorities; knowledge; self-work; time; gender; openness
Dedication

“What matters most is how well you walk through the fire”

-Charles Bukowski

I wrote this work with the hope that one day it would become irrelevant. That parents accepting their children for who they are would be commonplace. There is no rejection—only love. That all parents would look upon their children with unconditional positive regard. That all parents would place their children above their own needs, wants, beliefs, and values. That these children would spend their time growing and flourishing, not working through unnecessary pain and trauma. I thank the 15 parents who had the courage to participate in this study, for bearing the burden of being open and honest about their shortcomings as they worked to accept their gay son. Your vulnerability, selflessness, and compassion kept me going and I am honored to have heard your stories.
Acknowledgments

To Theresa Marie Edens, I thank you for your never-ending support as my manic pixie dream girl. You grounded me throughout this process and prevented me from turning into the cynical and bitter man I’m sure I would have become. I had invested so much of my identity into my work that I had forgotten to live my life. The warmth, acceptance, and zest for life that you have shown me kept me going throughout this process and reminded me why I am engaged in this work—to help people heal. I would not have been able to complete this study without you.

To my dissertation committee, thank you for your never-ending support, as you waded through my atrocious grammar and poetic sentence structure the resists academic writing. I have learned so much from all of you. Thank you, Dr. Kashubeck-West, for always reminding me that I have the capacity to do more and for only accepting my best work. To Dr. Cottone, thank you for re-shaping the way I view the counseling field and our role as therapists within in it (yes, I agree that counseling fits into the social constructivist paradigm—you win). To Dr. Nelson, thank you for your uncanny ability to read people like a book and see things that no one else does, as well as your unabashed support of the LGBTQ+ community and enthusiastic support of this work. To Dr. Taylor, thank you for reminding me to focus on the positive, because of you, I did not create
another model that details the deficits. Instead, I was able to create a work that highlights the beauty in the struggle of these parents—a clinical re-frame in its truest form.

To my parents, thank you for teaching me the necessary lessons that led me to become the man I am today. Thank you for always being there to support me in any way that you could. In addition, thank you for allowing me to vent whenever I needed to (even if it was really, really late at night). I believe that it takes a great deal of empathy to support someone in an endeavor that we don’t fully understand. I look forward to us continuing to grow together.
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**Heterosexual Parents Who Move Towards Acceptance of their Gay Son**

**CHAPTER ONE: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Sexual minority offspring often struggle with the experience of rejection from their parents. Rhoades et al. (2018) found 49% of a sample of 657 sexual minority children had experienced parental rejection due to their LGBTQ+ identity. The act of rejection can vary for these children. Heterosexual parents may simply refuse to acknowledge the sexual orientation of their child, or they may reject the youth entirely, expelling them from the home. According to the literature, sexual minority children anticipate this rejection. In a study conducted by Timmins, Rimes, and Rahman (2017), sexual minority twins reported higher expectations of rejection compared to their heterosexual co-twins. Unfortunately, little is known about how heterosexual parents engage in the process of rejecting or accepting their sexual minority children. Specifically, little is known about those parents who initially reject their child due to their sexual orientation, but ultimately come to accept them.

Acceptance of sexual minority youth by their heterosexual parents plays a vital role in the mental well-being of these youth (D’Amico & Julien 2012; Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008; Oshri, Sutton, Clay-Warner, & Miller, 2015; Pearson, Thrane, & Wilkinson, 2017; Starks, Millar, Tucks, & Wells, 2015). Acceptance and attachment to heterosexual parents is of critical importance because those youth who experience acceptance are more likely to experience greater well-being, higher self-esteem, higher social support, and better general health (Ryan & Chen-Hayes, 2013). Religious beliefs also appear to have an influence on acceptance of sexual minority children. Diamond et al. (2013) found that struggling heterosexual parents of faith needed more time
reconciling religious beliefs with their child’s sexual orientation. Reconciliation includes addressing fears related to being rejected by their communities, as well as processing concerns for the child’s well-being. This study suggested that key factors associated with rejection and acceptance for heterosexual parents may be: religion, rejection by others, and fear for their children.

The goal of this work was to investigate why some heterosexual parents initially reject their children as sexual minority individuals but then, through an unknown process, are able to move to acceptance of their child. A better understanding of this process will provide clinicians with more direction and guidance when working with families who are struggling to accept their sexual minority children.

**Attachment Theory and Belonging**

**Attachment Dynamics**

Attachment theory provides a framework for understanding heterosexual parent dynamics with their sexual minority children. Attachment is the child’s level of connection to important figures in their life (i.e., parents). In other words, “attachment behavior has the predictable outcome of increasing proximity of the child to the attachment figure (usually the mother)” (Cassidy, 2016, p. 4). These attachment behaviors appear as healthy parental interactions with the child and foster a sense of security. The level of security experienced by the child is the main focus of attachment theory (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Healthy attachment to parents is beneficial and is also associated with increased communication in the parent-child relationship. Grafsky (2014) found that those youth who felt closer to their parents were more likely to confide in them during times of stress. There are several different types of
attachment patterns or styles that can be exhibited by a child. These patterns can be separated into three different types: secure, insecure/anxious, and insecure/avoidant (Sutton, 2018). The child’s particular attachment style is determined through interactions the child has with important attachment figures. Parental dynamics can also predict the child’s behavior and the child’s sense of security in their own family (Bowlby, 1988).

**Attachment patterns in adults**

In adults, securely attached individuals are characterized by comfort with intimacy and a lack of difficulty in connecting with others (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Those individuals with an insecure/anxious attachment style typically experience enmeshed relationships and expect a high level of closeness. These adults also have high expectations of reciprocity from their partners (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). In addition, these individuals typically struggle to control their emotions (Brenning & Braet, 2013). Individuals with an insecure/avoidant attachment style are more likely to fear intimacy and to avoid relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). They are also more likely to suppress their emotions and experience difficulty in managing those same emotions (Brenning & Braet, 2013).

Attachment styles are not fixed and can change over time. However, there is currently a dearth in the literature regarding studies that explore a change in attachment patterns for sexual minority individuals. Nonetheless, Cozzarelli, Karafa, Collins, and Tagler (2003) observed changes in attachment for a sample of 442 women who had received abortions. Across a two-year time period, the authors found that 46% of the sample experienced a change in their attachment patterns (i.e., their attachment style with significant others). A history of abuse and a history of depression were two main
variables associated with a change in attachment style. In addition, life events also predicted changes in attachment style, such as: getting married, experiencing a break-up, having a miscarriage, or experiencing sexual assault. Level of self-esteem was also associated with attachment style, with high levels of self-esteem being associated with a secure attachment. In addition, those individuals who had an attachment style that moved from insecure to secure also displayed high levels of self-esteem. The authors found that social support was significantly associated with attachment style, with those women displaying secure attachment having higher levels of social support. Interpersonal conflict also predicted the type of attachment, with insecurely attached women experiencing more conflict than securely attached women. The authors also assessed the mental health of the participants by measuring distress and well-being. Women who consistently experienced insecure attachment were more likely to be distressed, compared to women who experienced consistent secure attachment. Similarly, those women who had consistent insecure attachment experienced lower levels of well-being compared to those women who were consistently secure (Cozzarelli, Karafa, Collins, & Tagler, 2003). This study lends support to the idea that attachment is not fixed and attachment patterns can change. This change can be for better or for worse, depending upon the individual’s life experiences. Future research should explore the relationship between abuse, depression, life events, self-esteem, and changing attachment for sexual minority individuals.

**Parent-child attachment**

In regard to the impact of attachment on the parent child relationship, much of the current literature focuses on the dynamic between mothers and their children. Posada and Walters (2018a) found that in order for a child to see their mother as a secure base, the
mother needs to invest a substantial amount of time and support in the child’s formative years. Construction of secure base relationships between mother and child is an integral process of attachment and involves the mother helping their child learn to manage their emotions (Posada & Waters, 2018b). A separate study by Waters et al. (2009) also identified the association between emotion regulation and healthy attachment. The authors examined 73 4-and-a-half-year-olds to determine the agreement between mother and child in regards to the emotions that the child displayed. In mother-child relationships where both child and mother identified the same emotion more consistently, the authors identified a higher level of secure attachment (Waters et al., 2009). Parents engaged in successful emotion regulation appear to have an enhanced connection between themselves and their child. Diamond and Shpigel (2014) found that parental emotional intolerance acted as a barrier to connection between heterosexual parents and their sexual minority children. One family that participated in the study was convinced that their son was gay because he had been seduced by a gay man. They wanted therapy to change his sexual orientation. The authors informed the family that they did not believe in changing a person’s sexual orientation, but that they were willing to sit with them as they worked through their personal crisis. However, the family could not sit with the feelings of fear, confusion, and pain that arose when discussing their son’s sexual orientation. They discontinued therapy after 2 sessions. These studies indicate that a parent’s ability to regulate and accept their own emotions may influence the attachment style they have with their children.

Parental self-reports of attachment style also appear to be relevant to the ability of their children to regulate their own emotions. Borelli et al. (2019) examined parental self-
report of attachment style and the association with their children’s emotional reactivity and regulation. The children were given a series of puzzles to solve, several of which were unsolvable. The authors then measured their emotional reactivity after the child had engaged in the task. The authors found that parental attachment patterns with high levels of anxiety were associated with negative emotional valence in their children after they attempted the puzzles. Conversely, the children of those parents with avoidant attachment patterns showed lower negative emotional valence after attempting the puzzles. In addition, children whose parents displayed higher attachment anxiety demonstrated worse emotional reactivity at a one and a half year follow-up as compared to those children with secure or avoidant attachment patterns. Children of parents with high anxiety reported having more positive and negative emotions, and these children also reported needing to exert more control over these emotions. It is possible that parents with higher attachment anxiety may over-engage with their child’s negative emotional display. This behavior may encourage more negative emotions from their children, keep the child from regulating their own emotions. The parent’s reactions may also scare the child and make them fearful of approaching their parents to get their needs met or their emotions validated.

Attachment between mother and child appears to be associated with the physical well-being of the child as well. Harvey, Farrell, Imami, Carré, and Slatcher (2018) examined the relationship between maternal attachment anxiety/avoidance and the cortisol levels of their children. While there was no association between maternal attachment anxiety and cortisol levels, the authors found a positive association between maternal attachment avoidance and flatter diurnal cortisol slopes in their children. A
blunted diurnal cortisol slope is maladaptive and considered a precursor for multiple disorders (Nijm et al., 2007). These disorders include: chronic headaches, fibromyalgia, rheumatoid arthritis, and chronic fatigue syndrome (Heim et al., 2000). Based on these findings, negative childhood attachment experiences appear to be associated with poor health patterns in adulthood (Kuras et al., 2017).

While a large portion of the attachment literature focuses on child attachment with mothers, the importance of fathers engaging with their children is not to be understated. St. George, Wroe, and Cashin (2018) reviewed the relationship between fathers engaging in stimulating activities with their children and the development of the child. The authors identified 26 studies that examined this relationship. They found an overall positive relationship between stimulating play with fathers and healthy cognitive, physical, and psycho-social development in the child.

Parent-child attachment also appears to be associated with the child’s experience of trauma. Charest, Hébert, Bernier, Langevin, and Miljkovitch (2018) examined the role of attachment in the experience of behavioral problems for children who had been sexually abused. Their sample consisted of 391 children ages 3.5-6 years. The authors found that a disorganized attachment pattern partially mediated the relationship between child sexual abuse and internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems in the children. Similar research regarding trauma and chronic pain also reflects the importance of parental attachment. Ratnamohan and Kozlowska (2017) examined the influence of parental attachment on the experience of chronic pain for 48 children. Compared to children who did not experience chronic pain and trauma, these 48 children exhibited at-risk attachment patterns and experienced higher rates of loss. Ongoing anxiety within the
attachment relationship as well as unresolved loss and trauma, appears to be associated with the onset and maintenance of chronic pain in children.

Recent neurological advancements have led to refinements of attachment theory and enhance our understanding of the parent-child attachment process. The Internal Working Model (IWM) is a proposed structure in the brain that helps us predict, translate, and direct our interactions with other people (Craik, 1943). Researchers propose that we need IWMs not just to understand the environment we live in, but in order to better understand ourselves (Bowlby, 1973; 1980; 1988). Further support exists through the identification of specific areas in the brain associated with recognizing bodies and faces by way of peripheral neurons transmitting signals to brain sites (Cassidy, 2001). These studies lend support to the idea that our brains are prewired to form attachments with other people. Researchers have examined how various brain structures interact with attachment related behaviors. In one study, mothers experienced stronger activations of the Orbitofrontal Cortex (OFC) when they viewed images of their own infants that they had never seen before as compared to when they viewed pictures of other infants (Nitschke et al., 2004). Another study conducted by Lorberbaum et al. (2002) examined the response of the Anterior Midsegment of the Cingulate Cortex (aMCC) in mothers of crying infants. The researchers noticed that activation of the aMCC was associated with empathetic responses by the mother. New developments in neuroscience have helped advance our understanding of attachment in humans. In addition, these studies appear to indicate an association between attachment behavior and certain brain structures.

**Parental attachment with their own caregivers**
An unhealthy attachment, or a lack of attachment, on the part of the child, appears to be related to the mental well-being of the parents. In a study conducted by Koropeckyj-Cox (2002), poor relationship quality with their children was linked to higher rates of depression and loneliness for both mothers and fathers. In addition, Friedlander, Lambert, and de la Peña (2008) found an association between parents who struggled to form a healthy attachment to their child, and attachment ruptures with their own parents.

This pattern of experiencing attachment ruptures as a child and then struggling to attach as a parent is highlighted in the literature. Parents who struggle to attach to their children appear to have experienced their own attachment-related trauma during childhood. Kindsvatter and Desmond (2013) described how unmet attachment needs for both parent and child are associated with ruptured attachment. Parents who exhibited behaviors such as clinging to their children, distancing themselves from their children, parentification, and/or dismissing their child’s request for comfort, were likely to have experienced the same behaviors by their own parents when they were children (Bailey, Morgan, Pederson, & Bento, 2007; Hautamaki, Hautamaki, Neuvonen, & Maliniemi-Piispanen, 2010). Kindsvatter and Desmond (2013) described two common responses to not having attachment needs met. Parents who engage in hyperactivation are attempting to get their attachment needs met by seeking out reassurance or placing intense demands for attention on others. These parents seek this reassurance and affection as a means of warding off abandonment or potential abandonment by their own children (Fraley, Niedenthal, Marks, Brumbaugh, & Vicary, 2006; Fraley & Shaver, 1998). Conversely, parents who engage in deactivation are attempting to protect themselves from abandonment by creating as much distance between themselves and others. This may
HETEROSEXUAL PARENTS THAT MOVE TOWARD ACCEPTANCE

appear as anger or rage directed toward those that the parent feels are going to abandon them (Cassidy & Kobak, 1988; Weger 2006). Parents who struggle to connect with their children may not be concerned with their child’s sexual orientation, but rather they may be struggling with unmet attachment needs. They then attempt to have their own children fulfill these needs.

Undifferentiated rejection, or internal psychological feelings of rejection that are projected onto the child by the parent, also appear to play a role in the dynamic between parent and child. Sumbleen, Khatun, Khaleque, and Rohner (2019) conducted a meta-analysis on 102 studies that examined psychological maladjustment in children and undifferentiated rejection. Specifically, the authors inspected the current perceptions of the children in the study as well as their parents’ remembrance of undifferentiated rejection in their own childhood. The authors found that the experience of undifferentiated rejection for both maternal and paternal parents was associated with psychological problems in these parents as well as in their children. In addition, maternal undifferentiated rejection had a significantly stronger association with psychological maladjustment in their children. This research supports the idea that mothers appear to have a significant impact on the psychological well-being of their children. Parents that experienced undifferentiated rejection as children appear to be more likely to have attachment difficulties with their own children.

Parental trauma and attachment

Parents that struggle to attach to their children may be influenced by their environment. Buchanan, Power, and Verity (2014), examined the experiences of 16 women who were exposed to domestic violence. These women responded to the violence
by increasing their maternal protectiveness in order to ensure the physical and psychological safety of their infants. This protectiveness was prioritized above forming a healthy attachment with their child. A similar pattern is reflected in other literature regarding parenting styles. Ormrod, Anderman, and Anderman (2017) discuss three parenting styles: authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive. While authoritative parenting is typical viewed as the optimal style of parenting (e.g., shared decision making, enhanced autonomy in the youth), the authors recognized that in certain situations authoritarian parenting is the better option. This style of parenting places more control in the hands of the parents, and children and youth are expected to follow their commands. If the family lives in an unsafe or dangerous environment, then authoritarian parenting is viewed as the better parenting style. This style allows parents to exert more control in order to keep their children safe. However, this style may impede the parent’s ability to attach to their child.

Cristobal, Santelices, and Fuenzalida (2017) examined how the experience of trauma in childhood related to women’s experiences of motherhood. The authors surveyed 125 mothers and found an association between those mothers who experienced physical neglect in combination with insecure attachment, and difficulties with maternal reflective functioning. Reflective functioning is the ability of parents to identify the mental state associated with a particular behavior (e.g., a child cries because they are exhausted). Parents who are unable to engage in reflective functioning may struggle to attach to their children.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) also appears to be associated with the parents’ ability to form a healthy attachment with their child. Van E et al., and
Jongmans (2016) reviewed 72 research studies that addressed the association between parents’ symptoms of PTSD and their engagement with their children. The authors were able to identify several patterns in the data. Those parents who experienced PTSD were less emotionally available to their children and tended to perceive their children more negatively than those parents who did not report symptoms of PTSD. In addition, children whose parents experienced PTSD symptoms were more likely to exhibit problems in their psychosocial development compared to children whose parents did not exhibit PTSD symptoms. The authors also found that these children experienced relational patterns with their parents that were similar to those patterns seen in children whose parents had been diagnosed with depression, as well as parents with anxiety. Similar results were detected in another study where the authors found an association between communication of parental trauma and their child’s attachment style for parents with PTSD (Dalgaard, Todd, Daniel, & Montgomery, 2016).

The research also indicates that attachment-based parenting interventions may help improve the relationship between mother and child for parents who have experienced trauma. Muzik et al. (2015) examined the effectiveness of the attachment-based intervention *Mom Power* (MP). This program consists of 13 group sessions that address parenting as well as self-care. The authors found that participation in MP was associated with a reduction in depression and PTSD-related symptomology, as well as a decrease in caregiver helplessness. Women who attended approximately 70% of the MP groups displayed improvement in mental health as well as parenting ability. Attachment-based interventions, such as *Mom Power* appear to be associated with improved parenting capability.
Attachment and acceptance of sexual minority children

Sexual minority children appear to have a higher level of detachment with their heterosexual parents. Wilson, Zeng, and Blackburn (2011) surveyed 600 participants (heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian, gay) to determine their level of detachment with parental figures as well as the association with self-esteem. The authors developed a survey that assessed demographic information, parental detachment, parental attachment, parenting methodology, self-esteem, as well as a question regarding parental relationships. The authors also utilized the Pomerantz Scale (Pomerantz, Qin, Wang, & Chen, 2009) which assesses how adults use their relationships with others in their descriptions of themselves. The authors modified this scale to focus on children’s relationships with their parents and the association with the child’s self-description. Wilson et al. found that sexual minority participants reported a significantly higher rate of detachment with their parents compared to their heterosexual counterparts. Self-esteem reports also differed significantly across sexual orientation, with heterosexual participants reporting higher rates of self-esteem compared to sexual minority individuals, specifically bisexuals. It appears that heterosexual parents may be more likely to experience detachment with their sexual minority children compared to their heterosexual children. Sexual minorities may experience less connection with their parents, hindering their support system and altering their level of self-esteem.

Healthy attachment to heterosexual parents also appears to be associated with the coming out experience for sexual minority individuals. In a cross-sectional study involving 309 LGB individuals, Carnelley, Hepper, Hicks, and Turner (2009) found that those participants who viewed their mother as accepting during their childhood were
more likely to have already come out to her. Those parents who encouraged independence in their children were more likely to react in a positive way to the disclosure of their child’s sexual orientation. The parent-child dynamic also appears to be associated with the sexual minority child’s experience with romantic relationships, especially for men. The authors found an association between mothers’ positive reactions to their son’s sexual orientation and lower romantic attachment anxiety for their sons (Carnelley et al.). It is possible that an unhealthy relationship between heterosexual parents and their sexual minority children may be associated with the child’s coming out experience, as well as their ability to form healthy romantic relationships.

In summation, there is a significant difference in self-esteem reporting between sexual minorities and heterosexuals. This may indicate that sexual minorities experience difficulties in forming social support networks (Wilson et al., 2011). Lack of attachment to heterosexual parents may influence the level of self-esteem experienced by sexual minorities. There is also an association between struggling heterosexual parents and low levels of confidence in romantic relationships for sexual minority children (Carnelley et al., 2009). Sexual minority children also appear to be at an increased risk for depressive symptoms if their heterosexual parents struggle to accept them (Rosario et al., 2013). In addition, there appears to be a relationship between heterosexual parents who struggle to accept their sexual minority children and increased rates of substance use for those children (Padilla et al., 2010). A lack of attachment between sexual minority children and their heterosexual parents appears to be detrimental. A lack of self-esteem and confidence, increased risk of depressive symptoms, and increased of substance abuse may make it more difficult for these children to form healthy and productive relationships.
or build healthy support systems. Re-connecting heterosexual parents and their sexual minority children may help offset these risk factors.

**Parental rejection**

Less secure attachment between heterosexual parents and their sexual minority children appears to be related to the mental health of the children. Rosario et al. (2013) surveyed participants of the *Growing Up Today Study* (GUTS). This sample includes 6,122 participants, with 1.7% identifying as lesbian or gay, another 1.7% identifying as bisexual, and 10% identifying as mostly heterosexual. The lesbian, gay, bisexual, and mostly heterosexual participants reported higher rates of depressive issues compared to completely heterosexual participants. Less secure attachment partially mediated the relationship between identifying as a sexual minority and experiencing more depressive distress. Identifying as a sexual minority appears to be associated with less secure attachment with mothers, which, in turn, predicted depressive distress. These mothers also reported less affection for their sexual minority children as compared to their completely heterosexual children. This study indicates that heterosexual parents who struggle to connect to their sexual minority children may impede the attachment process. This is associated with an increased level of depression for their child. This finding is consistent with past research. Coleman (1982) identified an association between rejection by family members and an altered self-concept for the youth. This altered concept has been linked to depression. Heterosexual parents who struggle to attach to their sexual minority children may also increase the risk of drug use for their child. Padilla, Crisp, and Rew (2010) utilized a national survey containing 1,906 GLB youth ages 12-17. The authors found that a positive reaction by the youth’s mother to their sexual orientation
served as a protective factor against drug use. The authors stated that parental acceptance of sexual orientation is important for healthy attachment between parent and child as well as healthy development for the child. Parents who struggle to accept their sexual minority children may be placing those children at risk for increased drug use.

As noted earlier, sexual minority individuals already experience a multitude of risk factors including: increased substance abuse (D’amico & Julien, 2012; Espelage et al., 2008), religious barriers to family connection (Roe, 2017; Savin-Williams, 1989); and increased risk of abuse (Friedman, 2011; Saewyc et al., 2006). Those sexual minority individuals with a general lack of connection to their heterosexual parents may be particularly at risk. Pearson et al. (2017) utilized the data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health and found that relationships with parents, educational attainment, and sexual victimization were all associated with runaway or thrown away experiences (i.e., being kicked out of the home) for sexual minority children. This negative association persists into adulthood. For sexual minority men, this includes a greater likelihood of smoking, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation. For sexual minority women, thrown away experiences are associated with health risk behaviors, more depressive symptoms, and poorer overall health (Pearson et al., 2017). Sexual minority individuals rejected by their parents also appear to have an increased risk for substance abuse. D’Amico and Julien (2012) surveyed 111 gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) youth who had disclosed their sexual orientation to their parents, and 53 GLB youth who had not disclosed their sexual orientation. The authors found an association between higher levels of acceptance by mothers and fathers and those youth who had disclosed their sexual orientation. In addition, the youth who had disclosed their sexual
orientation reported lower levels of alcohol and drug consumption compared to their undisclosed peers. For disclosed youth, past and current levels of acceptance and rejection were associated with the variation in the youth’s current identity and psychological maladjustment. Current rejection by parents was associated with higher use in the youths’ current alcohol and drug consumption.

Sexual minority youth are also more likely to experience abuse by family members compared to their heterosexual peers. Friedman (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of studies that assessed child abuse rates between sexual minorities and individuals who did not identify as sexual minorities. On average, sexual minorities were 3.8 times more likely to experience sexual abuse, 1.2 times more likely to experience parental physical abuse, 1.7 more likely to experience assault at school, and 2.4 times more likely to miss school due to fear, compared to individuals who did not identify as sexual minorities. Saewyc et al. (2006) analyzed data from seven population-based high school health surveys in the United States and Canada. For the sexual minority students in this sample, the authors found that bisexual girls had the highest rate of sexual abuse, with 1 in 4 reporting an experience of abuse. In contrast, 10-25% of heterosexual and mostly heterosexual girls reported experiences of sexual abuse. Similar patterns were found for gay and bisexual boys, with 1 in 5 gay boys reporting an experience of sexual abuse, and 1 in 4 bisexual boys reporting sexual abuse. This is in contrast to rates of sexual abuse experienced by heterosexual and mostly heterosexual boys, which was under 10%.

Saewyc et al. (2006) also identified similar patterns for physical abuse by family members. Bisexual and lesbian girls reported higher rates of physical abuse by a family
member compared to their heterosexual peers. Gay and bisexual boys also reported higher rates of physical abuse by a family member with up to 1 in 3 sexual minority boys reporting physical abuse by a family member compared to 1 in 8 for heterosexual boys.

In addition, D’Augelli et al. (2005) identified an association between past parental psychological abuse and reporting of suicide attempts for sexual minority children. Those children with greater psychological abuse from parents were less likely to report their suicide attempts. In addition, sexual orientation-related suicide attempts were associated with being identified as a sexual minority (i.e., “outed”), especially when the individual outing the sexual minority was a parent. Approximately half of the suicide attempts made by sexual minority children in this sample were associated with sexual orientation. In particular, those children who were considered gender atypical by parents and whose parents attempted to curb their gender atypical behavior, were at higher risk for sexual orientation related suicide attempts. This was especially the case for male children.

In summary, sexual minorities face a range of risks: increased substance abuse (D’amico & Julien, 2012; Espelage et al., 2008), religious barriers to family connection (Roe, 2017; Savin-Williams, 1989); and increased risk of abuse (Friedman, 2011; Saewyc et al., 2006). In addition, those sexual minorities that do not have a healthy attachment to their parents appear to experience additional risk factors such as increased risk of running away or being thrown away (Pearson et al., 2017). Sexual minority youth that are currently facing rejection by their heterosexual parents were also more likely to experience higher levels of alcohol and drug consumption compared to those who were not experiencing rejection (D’Amico & Julien, 2012). In regard to suicide attempts, being outing as a sexual minority by a parent is associated with suicide. In addition, sexual
minorities are less likely to report these suicide attempts. It appears as though rejection by heterosexual parents on grounds of sexual orientation is associated with additional risks for sexual minority individuals. Due to the large number of risk factors that this population already faces, these individuals cannot afford an unhealthy attachment with their heterosexual parents. Reconnecting sexual minority individuals to their heterosexual parents after a period of rejection may help offset these risks.

A Sense of Belonging

The concept of belongingness, which has been defined as “a perceived experience of consistent interaction and persistent caring from others, usually as part of a group” (Slaten et al., 2019, p. 297) highlights whether or not the child feels cared for and valued for who they are as an individual.

Feeling a sense of belonging in one’s family appears to be associated with mental health concerns. In a longitudinal study conducted by Barzilay et al. (2019), the authors examined the impact of school-based suicide prevention interventions. Researchers surveyed 11,110 high school students. This survey identified several themes: perceived burdensomeness, health risk behaviors, thwarted belongingness, self-injury, suicide ideation, and suicide attempts. The students were then re-assessed with a 12-month follow-up. The authors found that while belongingness to peers was not a significant indicator of suicide, a lack of belongingness to parents was associated with increased suicidal ideation.

In another study conducted on suicide, similar results were found. Wolford-Clevenger, Stuart, Elledge, McNulty, and Spirito (2019) examined the association between thwarted belongingness and suicidal ideation. The authors surveyed 206 college
students daily over a period of 90 days. They found that a thwarted sense of belongingness was associated with daily passive suicidal ideation. In addition, high levels of thwarted belongingness mediated the relationship between perceived burdensomeness and daily active suicidal ideation. These studies lend support to the idea that attachment, or the level of security the child feels between themselves and their parents (Ainsworth et al., 1978), does not fully address the dynamics between parent and child. If the child’s family has not created a safe space for them within the family where they feel an affinity, natural liking, or sense of understanding, then the child is likely to still experience negative consequences.

**Other factors that influence attachment**

Maintaining interaction between heterosexual parents and their sexual minority children appears to be associated with the experience of acceptance. This is opposed to those heterosexual parents who distance themselves from their sexual minority child after they come out. Samarova, Shilo, and Diamond (2013) found that 40% of the Israeli parents in their sample who were fully rejecting, or almost fully rejecting, became more accepting of their sexual minority child after 1.5 years. Factors that appeared to contribute to this phenomenon were: maintaining contact with their children, listening to their children’s stories, and being exposed to sexual minority individuals and their culture. These parents appear to be fostering a sense of belonging with their sexual minority child. One key aspect of cultivating belonging is consistent interaction and caring from others (Slaten, Rose, Bonifay, & Ferguson, 2019). Fostering a sense of belonging may be a key distinction between heterosexual parents who reject their children outright, and those who eventually move towards a place of acceptance.
Belonging was a key focus of this particular study. Beliefs regarding the cause or source of sexual minority orientations also appear to be associated with the level of connection experienced between parent and child. In a study conducted by Shpigel et al. (2015), the authors found that parents who were adamant that their child had chosen to be a sexual minority were less likely to work toward acceptance or even tolerate their child’s sexual orientation. The belief that sexual orientation is a choice appears to be a significant factor in regard to the level of closeness experienced by parent and child and needs further examination.

Heterosexual parent’s religious beliefs may act as a barrier to acceptance for sexual minority populations. Several studies have identified an association between religion and parental non-acceptance, with acceptance being less likely for families that come from a fundamental or orthodox religious background (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993; Schope, 2002; Shpigel, Belsky, & Diamond, 2015). In a study conducted by Roe (2017), sexual minority children reported experiencing religion and religious beliefs as an impediment to receiving support from their parents. This may be due to the finding that many religious parents view their children as a continuation of themselves and have certain expectations for them (i.e., heterosexual orientation). The literature also details frequent negative reactions by religious parents toward their sexual minority children. Some of these reactions include verbal, physical, and emotional abuse, blaming the youth for their sexual orientation, and isolating the youth from the rest of their family. These reactions by parents are associated with increased mental illness, higher rates of suicidality, and a decreased self-esteem for the sexual minority youth (Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009; Szymanski & Gupta,
Isolation may also be particularly detrimental for sexual minority youth. According to Bowlby’s (1988) definition of attachment, children must feel able to return to their parents during times of stress. Isolating the sexual minority youth from the family for religious reasons may impede the youth’s ability to return to the family during stressful times, altering their attachment style.

Vanderwaal, Sedlacek, and Lane (2017) examined the experiences of sexual minority youth growing up in the Seventh-Day Adventist Religion. The authors surveyed 310 sexual minority youth and found that these youth were more likely to experience low levels of support from their family members. The youth were also more likely to experience elevated levels of depression. In addition to Seventh-Day Adventists, parents who identify with the Church of Latter-Day Saints also appear to struggle with acceptance. In a case study conducted by Nielson (2017), the author examined the experience of a gay son growing up in a Mormon household. The author found that the family struggled initially, attempting to curb their son’s behavior by limiting his contact with other men and sending him to a sexual addiction therapist. Over time, they gradually became more accepting, stating that they needed time to understand. Ultimately, these parents still wished that their son would be heterosexual and would limit his displays of affection with his boyfriend. These parents were able to incorporate religion into their acceptance of their son (i.e., God loves us no matter what we do, so we should love our children no matter what they do). This may be an attempt at fostering a sense of belonging for their gay son by the heterosexual parents. However, religion appears to complicate the acceptance process. The association between heterosexual parents, sexual minority children, and religion needs further examination.
The child’s reaction to their own sexual orientation also appears to predict the level of closeness between heterosexual parents and their sexual minority children. Ben-Ari (1995) found that parents who reported seeing how relieved and happy their child was after they disclosed their sexual orientation felt more hopeful and accepting of them. Parents who witness their children become part of an accepting community (i.e., find where they belong) may feel more optimistic about their child’s future and, as a result, may become more accepting of their child’s sexual orientation. In contrast, Diamond and Shpigel (2014) found that rigid parents with intense levels of fear and anger were resistant to engaging in a relationship with their sexual minority child. This is especially true for bisexual individuals who appear to have more difficulty being accepted by their parents (Samarova, Shilo, & Diamond, 2013), and also appear to receive less social support (Balsam & Mohr, 2007). The environment and community also appear to play a role in rates of acceptance. The parents in their study feared losing their support systems (i.e., extended family) and feared facing ridicule for having a sexual minority child. Belonging may not only exist as an important concept for sexual minority children, but for parents as well. Fear that they may no longer have a place in their community due to their child’s sexual orientation, may influence their acceptance of their sexual minority child. Engaging parents in LGB-affirming environments (such as PFLAG), can help create more supportive communities and is also associated with increased parental acceptance (Diamond & Shpigel, 2014).

In summation, the experience of rejection for sexual minorities is a very real and identifiable problem (Coleman, 1982; Rhoades et al., 2018; Timmins et al., 2017). This struggle for acceptance is exacerbated by the fact that there is a dearth in the literature
regarding the process that leads parents to reject their children and, more importantly, the process that leads parents to accept their sexual minority children. Further complicating the experience of sexual minority youth are the risk factors that they already face, such as increased substance abuse (D’amico & Julien, 2012; Espelage et al., 2008), and increased risk of abuse (Friedman, 2011; Saewyc et al., 2006). In addition, it appears as though a lack of connection with heterosexual parents may exacerbate these risk factors (Pearson et al., 2017). Reconnecting sexual minority children to their heterosexual parents after experiences of rejection may provide a much-needed support system, and act as a buffer to common risk factors experienced by sexual minorities (Bowlby, 1988, D’amico & Julien, 2012; Diamond et al., 2013; Ryan et al., 2010). In order for reconnection to occur between heterosexual parents and their sexual minority children, we must understand the role of attachment and the process that leads heterosexual parents to acceptance.

Gaps in the Research

Unfortunately, much of the research regarding disclosure of sexual orientation to heterosexual parents by sexual minority children is over 20 years old (Brown, 1988; D’Augelli, 1991; D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Herdt & Boxer, 1993; Savin-Williams, 1995; Savin-Williams, 1998; Tremble, Schneider, & Appathurai, 1989; Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, & Williams, 1994). This limits our current understanding of rejection and acceptance by heterosexual parents. In fact, some members of the research community believe that being a parent of a sexual minority child is not a single event, but a continual process that needs to be further explored (Grafsky, 2014).

A lack of understanding in regard to the current dynamics between heterosexual parents and sexual minority children appears to be reflected in the literature. The age of
sexual minority children when they disclose their sexual orientation for the first time, may be one such complicating factor. Floyd and Bakeman (2006) surveyed 767 gay, lesbian, and bisexual adults and adolescents in regard to their coming out experience. In the sample, the authors identified a trend where participants disclosed their sexual orientation at younger ages than have been reported in the past. On average, participants who recently came out were younger than age 18. As more cross-sectional research supporting sexual minority orientations works its way into the mass media, the more likely it is that the general public will become more tolerant or move towards acceptance. Indeed, this appears to have already begun. An increase in tolerance and acceptance appears to occur simply by having more contact with people who identify as sexual minorities (Altemeyer, 2002). It is then reasonable to believe that this new level of acceptance by society has encouraged youth to come out as sexual minorities earlier in their lifespans and thus could potentially change the dynamic between parent and child, as well as rates of acceptance and rejection. More research needs to be done on the current dynamics between heterosexual parents and their sexual minority children.

It also possible that a conflation exists between sexual orientation and gender identity for heterosexual parents of sexual minority children. Jadwin-Cakmak, Pingel, Harper, and Bauermeister (2015), found that gender expectations appear to shape how gay and bisexual sons expect their fathers to react when they disclose their sexual orientation. The boys in this study expected negative reactions from their fathers due to their father’s desire for them to have a masculine gender expression. The patterns of acceptance and rejection that occur with heterosexual parents may have a stronger association with an atypical gender expression versus a sexual minority orientation. In
addition, conflation between sex and gender for heterosexual parents appears to be part of the historical narrative. In 2002, Nicolosi and Nicolosi published a work titled *A Parent’s Guide to Preventing Homosexuality*. In this work, the authors instructed parents to curb their child’s gender non-conformity as a means of discouraging same-sex attraction. This work highlights the complications that can arise when heterosexual parents confuse their child’s gender identity with their sexual orientation (Shidlo & Gonsiorek, 2017). The conflation between gender and sexual orientation needs further examination to determine if there is a component of parental acceptance that is based on gender identity and expression as opposed to sexual orientation.

**Why this Study is Needed**

Connection to parents is a healthy part of development for adolescents. Adolescents are able to flourish when their parents behave warmly towards them, express love, are involved in their lives in a positive way, as well as when they promote the adolescent’s autonomy (Allen, Boykin, & Bell, 2000; Diamond & Shpigel, 2014; Steinberg, 2001;). Parental support for sexual minority children is associated with a range of positive benefits for the youth, such as: a greater sense of self-esteem, a buffer against experiencing psychopathology, and a greater sense of perceived social support (D’Augelli, 2002; Diamond & Shpigel, 2014; Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Evans, Hawton, & Rodham, 2004; Floyd, Stein, Harter, Allison & Nye, 1999; Hershberger & D’Augelli, 1995; Needham & Austin, 2010; Ryan et al., 2010; Savin-Williams, 1989). These reasons necessitate further examination of the process that leads certain heterosexual parents to become more accepting.
One study found that a third of the heterosexual parents surveyed were rejecting when they first heard that their child identified as a sexual minority, with only 1 in 5 parents fully accepting their child after initially hearing the disclosure of their sexual identity (Ryan & Chen-Hayes, 2013). The sheer frequency of rejection, and the clear benefits of acceptance, warrant a deeper look into the dynamic between heterosexual parents and their sexual minority children.

It is also important to note the positive aspects associated with healthy and secure attachment to parents. These youth are more likely to experience greater well-being, higher self-esteem, higher social support, and better general health. (Ryan & Chen-Hayes, 2013). It is also possible that heterosexual parents may be accepting of their child, but their behavior may not always communicate that acceptance. The Family Acceptance Project works with families to help them become more accepting of their sexual minority children (Family Acceptance Project, 2002). The coordinators of this project found that in some situations what sexual minority children viewed as rejection was actually heterosexual parents attempting to help their child. Common behaviors engaged in by parents were: attempting to help the youth fit in, trying to help them be respected by others, and other actions that parents stated were an attempt to help them have a good life (Ryan & Chen-Hayes, 2013). It is possible that these parents, while not effectively communicating it, want their child to feel like they belong. Encouraging them to engage in behaviors that help them belong may then be part of the movement toward acceptance. Part of the disconnect between sexual minority youth and their heterosexual parents may not be a lack of acceptance, but a struggle by heterosexual parents to express that
acceptance. The concept of mistakes made by heterosexual parents, out of good intention, needs to be further explored.

In summation, this study is needed for a multitude of reasons. First, the use of attachment theory is associated with improvements in the relationship between heterosexual parents and their sexual minority children (Diamond et al., 2013; Diamond & Shpigel, 2014). The literature also documents the association between rejection by heterosexual parents and: depression, illegal drug use, suicide, unsafe sex, sexual victimization, health risk behaviors, current psychological distress, and homelessness (D’Augelli et al., 2005; Pearson et al., 2017; Puckett, Woodward, Mereish, & Pantalone, 2015; Rhoades et al., 2018; Ryan & Chen-Hayes, 2013). Understanding the relationship between heterosexual parents and their sexual minority children is necessary if clinicians hope to improve the quality of life for these families. A focus on heterosexual parents who initially rejected their sexual minority children, but then moved to a place of acceptance, may shed light on how to repair the broken attachment between parent and child.

We currently do not know what processes are involved for parents that initially reject their children, but then move to acceptance. This is compounded by the fact that much of the research that we currently have on the coming out process is over 20 years old (Brown, 1988; D’Augelli, 1991; D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Herdt & Boxer, 1993; Savin-Williams, 1995; Savin-Williams, 1998; Tremble et al., 1989; Wagner et al. 1994), and some researchers feel we need to know more about current trends for heterosexual parents and their sexual minority children (Grafsky, 2014). Unfortunately, the majority of the literature conducted on the relationship between sexual minorities and
their heterosexual parents focuses on the initial reactions that are experienced when the child discloses (D’Augelli, 1991; D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Herdt & Boxer, 1993; Pilkington & D’Augelli, 1995; Savin-Williams, 1995; Savin-Williams, 1998) but does not attend to the long-term processes that are engaged in by parents who eventually come to accept their sexual minority children.

The Current Study

This study examined the process associated with heterosexual parents who initially reject their sexual minority children, but then move to a place of acceptance. Movement to a place of acceptance involved any behavioral change away from rejection (i.e., removing a ban on the child’s romantic partners entering the home; attending a PFLAG meeting; educating themselves on LGBTQ+ issues, or defending their child’s sexual orientation). In other words, movement is defined as any action that indicates that heterosexual parents are attempting to incorporate their sexual minority child into their lives. The incorporation of the sexual minority child into the family structure was seen as fostering a sense of belonging. This work filled various gaps in the research and provided fresh research on the dynamics between heterosexual parents and their sexual minority children. This study explored the journeys of heterosexual parents as they come to a place of acceptance. Through semi-structured interviews, I came in contact with the mechanisms associated with acceptance, as well as the reflective process engaged in by heterosexual parents that led them to it.

Enhancing the connection between sexual minority children and their heterosexual parents is of crucial importance as these children are already less likely to have a strong connection to their parents compared to their heterosexual peers (Pearson &
Wilkinson, 2013). The goal of this study was to better understand the psychological processes involved with parents who initially struggle with their child’s sexual orientation, but ultimately come to accept them. I addressed these psychological processes by examining the experiences of heterosexual parents of sexual minority children, as well as their beliefs, and any particular qualities that they possessed.

Attachment theory provided the framework for this discussion. However, attachment theory did not fully explain the experience of acceptance for the sexual minority child. Attachment is defined as the level of connection between child and parent and the level of security the child feels in their relationship with their parents (Ainsworth et al., 1978). However, whether or not the child feels they have a place within their family extends beyond attachment. Assessing belongingness shed light on how welcomed the child felt in their family and the strength of their familial support system. This idea is reinforced by Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs which states that we need security (i.e., attachment) before we can experience love and belonging (Maslow, 1943).
Chapter 2

Method

The following chapter details the methodology and procedures that guided this grounded theory research study. The following research questions were addressed by heterosexual parents who initially rejected their sexual minority children, but then moved to a place of acceptance:

1. What experiences were associated with heterosexual parents as they came to accept their sexual minority child after initially rejecting them?
2. What beliefs were associated with the process of acceptance for heterosexual parents of sexual minority children?
3. What qualities were associated with heterosexual parents who move towards acceptance of their sexual minority children?
4. What role did attachment play in the acceptance of sexual minority children by heterosexual parents?
5. Did heterosexual parents who moved toward acceptance of their sexual minority children have a sense that their child belongs in their family?

Research Design

Grounded theory is one of the most popular methods of qualitative analysis (Minichello & Kottler, 2010). The goal of grounded theory is to create codes that become concepts, concepts that become categories, and then to determine a core category that represents the data as a whole. The reason this research methodology is referred to as grounded theory is that all of the codes, concepts, and categories created throughout the analysis must be “grounded” or connected to the data itself (i.e., interview transcripts).
The process involves breaking down the transcripts into descriptive and conceptual elements (i.e., codes). These elements are then reconstructed to create a whole picture of the data and describe the way in which different elements of the data interact with each other (Minichello & Kottler, 2010). This study utilized a dimensional analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), which involved comparing and contrasting different codes, groups, and categories based on a particular data set or context. In this study, the data set is heterosexual parents who move toward acceptance of their gay son after an initial period of rejection. This was a grounded theory study and included the following concepts: *theoretical sampling, constant comparative analysis, codes, concepts, and categories.*

**Procedures**

**Participants**

Participants for this study were recruited upon receiving approval from the Internal Review Board (IRB). The participants for this study were heterosexual parents of gay men who had moved towards acceptance of their gay son. All participants were at least 18 years of age. Movement towards acceptance was defined as initial rejection of one’s son when they came out to the parent as a gay man, followed by any behavioral change towards acceptance of their gay son. In all, 16 heterosexual parents were interviewed. One parent interview was rejected from this study due to acceptance occurring immediately upon their child coming out. The remaining 15 parents were interviewed, their interviews were subsequently recorded and transcribed, and the resulting transcript was coded and categorized. The following is a list of the pseudonyms utilized to denote each participant: Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, Epsilon, Zeta, Eta, Theta (rejected), Iota, Kappa, Lambda, Mu, Nu, Xi, Omicron, and Pi. Participants who are
married to one another are also identified: Couple A (Gamma & Delta), Couple B (Eta & Lambda), Couple C (Iota & Kappa), Couple D (Mu & Nu).

All participants of this study were informed of the requirements for participation (see informed consent form in Appendix B). The participants engaged in a 1-2 hour semi-structured interview (see interview protocol in Appendix C) with the researcher that took place either in-person, or through the use of ZoomPro® conference software for those participants who were at a distance. The interviews took place in a location where the participant felt the most comfortable sharing their experiences as the parent of a gay man. These parents were recruited through Facebook and other social media sites. In addition, this researcher engaged in a snowball sampling method by asking current participants if they were aware of any other heterosexual parents that initially struggled with their child’s sexual orientation, but then moved to a place of acceptance.

**Sampling Methods**

**Saturation.** The concept of saturation helps qualitative researchers determine how many participants are necessary for their research in order to fully understand the issue being studied (Hennink, Kaiser, & Marconi, 2017). This term was coined by Glaser and Strauss (1967), who referred to saturation as the point in the data collection phase where no new issues or ideas arise from the data and all relevant themes have been identified and thoroughly explored. Unfortunately, there is disagreement regarding how this concept is defined (Nelson, 2017), how the point of saturation is reached within qualitative research (Constantinou, Georgiou, & Perdikogianni, 2017), as well as factors that influence the acquisition of saturation (Hennink et al., 2017).
There is much debate over the appropriate sample size to achieve saturation in qualitative research (Hagaman, & Wutich, 2017). Morse (2000) found that while there is disagreement surrounding how many participants are necessary for a valid grounded theory study, the average number of participants ranges from 20-30. For example, the research journal *Archives of Sexual Behavior* requires that all grounded theory studies sent in for publication have at least 25-30 participants. Mason (2010) analyzed the sample size for 560 grounded theory studies and found that the number of participants ranged from 4 to 87, with the average number of participants being 32 with a standard deviation of 16.6. The high standard deviation sheds light on the lack of clarity regarding the exact number of participants needed to achieve saturation within a qualitative study. However, it is important to consider the nature of the study. For example, if the topic being studied is clear, then the researcher will not need as many participants or interviews in order to create a theory from the data (Morse, 2000). The composition of the participants also appears to be associated with how quickly saturation is reached. Hagaman and Wutich (2017) conducted a study with 132 participants on water issues. The authors found that they were able to quickly identify themes among participants who were similar to one another. However, when more diversity was added to the sample, the authors needed approximately 20-40 interviews in order to reach saturation. A separate study conducted by Boddy (2016), found similar results, with saturation being achieved with only 12 participants when working with a population that shares a number of similarities. If there are commonalities that exist within heterosexual parents of sexual minority children who move towards acceptance, then saturation may be achieved relatively quickly.
Researchers have developed their own methods of identifying the point of saturation. Constantinou et al. (2017) proposed a method of identifying saturation referred to as the Comparative Method for Themes Saturation (CoMeTS). This particular method involves comparing all of the themes discovered in each interview to all other themes in the study. The order of the interviews is then shuffled, and themes are again compared to one another. This process allows the researcher to have a clear picture of the data that has been found and whether or not more datum need to be collected.

Some authors have also differentiated between code saturation and meaning saturation within the data. Code saturation refers to when all of the thematic issues in the study have been identified, while meaning saturation refers to when the researcher has collected enough data to understand the full scope of the issue being studied. In their study Hennik et al. (2017) found that code saturation was reached at nine interviews, while meaning saturation was reached at 16-24 interviews. This study sheds light on the complex nature of achieving saturation within a qualitative study. The identification of important themes may happen quickly, but a deeper understanding of the topic of study appears to require more data. In this study, the focus was on meaning saturation. The reason for this is that some themes have already been identified and others were discovered fairly quickly (i.e., code saturation). However, I was interested in discovering the overarching process that led heterosexual parents to a place of acceptance, not simply themes associated with acceptance.

Non-random purposeful sampling. According to Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim (2015), purposive sampling is “the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses.” (p.2). Essentially, the researcher decides which participants
gain entrance to a study based on certain criteria. For this particular study, I chose to focus on the experience of heterosexual parents with sexual minority children. Therefore, two key requirements were that the participant is a parent, and that one of their children identifies as a sexual minority. In addition, the heterosexual parent needed to have moved toward acceptance. This means that the parent started out struggling to accept their sexual minority child upon initial disclosure of their sexual orientation. However, they have found a way to move toward a new understanding of their child and now experience acceptance. This is a key distinction. The goal of this study was not to explore the experiences of parents who immediately accepted their child, or parents who rejected their child and never repaired the relationship. The focus of this study was to better understand what changes the perspective of some heterosexual parents, ultimately leading them to accept their child’s sexual orientation. For this study, a move towards acceptance was any behavioral action that attempted to foster attachment or belonging (i.e., asking their child about romantic partners in their life, attending a PFLAG meeting, etc.). Participants who did not fit this criterion would not be able to provide the data necessary to answer the research questions for this study.

In addition to meeting the inclusion criteria required for this study, more practical considerations existed when selecting participants. For instance, some parents were not willing to participate or did not have the necessary availability to engage in this study (Bernard, 2002; Spradley, 1979). It was difficult to find participants that were willing to engage in a lengthy interview. The material covered in this interview focused on: the relationship between the parent and their child, experiences where the parent rejected their child’s sexual identity, and impactful experiences that changed the parent’s
perception of their child. Some parents may have declined to engage in this study because of the intense memories that it could have potentially triggered. In addition, some ideal participants were not local to the St. Louis area which prompted the need to travel. However, I attempted to mitigate this problem through the use of ZoomPro® software, which allowed me to communicate and record interviews with participants at a distance.

**Snowball sampling.** This method of sampling involves asking current research participants to provide the names of other people within their social network who may qualify for the study (Browne, 2005). The researcher then reaches out to these persons to determine whether or not they have the necessary qualifications to complete the study. This method of sampling is frequently used when the population under study is not readily available or “hidden” (Browne, 2005, p. 47). This is the case when considering heterosexual parents who move towards acceptance of their sexual minority children. Many of these parents and families did not advertise the struggle they had around coming to terms with their child’s sexual identity.

Snowball sampling was an important component of this study due to the fact that the population of study was not readily available. I utilized my own social contacts as well as Facebook and other social media methods in order to access this population. However, these methods had their limits and I quickly exhausted my social network. It was important to ask each participant to think of anyone else that they believed may qualify as a heterosexual parent who has moved toward acceptance. The use of snowball sampling is appropriate due to the fact that the goal of qualitative research is not to create a sample that can be generalized to the greater population, but can be used to create a better understanding of the experiences of that particular population (Charmaz, 2014)
Theoretical sampling. This method of sampling creates a level of flexibility in the grounded theory process. This means that the data collection methodology fits the research question that is being asked—not the other way around. This is of critical importance due to the fact that grounded theory methods shape what is seen in the data. Data collection methods must allow us to see the full range of possibilities for our research question(s) (Charmaz, 2014). Theoretical sampling allows the researcher to follow-up on interesting phenomenon or to move in a different direction based on what is gleaned from the data. Essentially, the researcher follows the occurrence of a theoretical construct (Patton, 2002). For example, some grounded theory researchers may forgo an initial literature review and go directly into data collection. After the first interview and first round of analysis, the researcher identifies key themes that will need future exploration. The researcher then selects participants that they believe will be able to expand upon the identified themes. The questions created in this stage of analysis become guiding forces. Questions such as: What is missing? What codes and concepts arose that were not expected, and how do we access them? These questions bring the researcher to their next interview or source of data (Charmaz, 2014; Marshall, 1996).

For this study, I engaged in theoretical sampling by following the constructs that appeared after each interview. For example, I predicted that religion would play a key role in acceptance for heterosexual parents of sexual minority children. When I interviewed a parent that did express religion as a barrier, I made sure to add more questions related to religion to the semi-structured interview for the next participant. I then identified key themes that arose from the following interview and again added new questions to the semi-structured interview that expanded on what had been found. This
pattern continued throughout the study. This method allowed the data to guide the research as opposed to rigidly adhering to a preliminary set of interview questions which could have led me to miss important data.

**Coders**

A main method of preventing bias from entering the study was through the use of co-coders. The use of co-coders incorporates a strong form of triangulation within this study, helping to prevent personal bias from influencing these results. These three co-coders coded alongside the primary researcher and the combination of their code and the primary researchers code became the open code for that particular line of text. The three coders involved were: Sarah Gamblin, Tiffany Somerville, and Emily Woodruff. All of these coders identify as white and female. In addition, all of them are highly educated, have a social justice mindset, and are also in mental health professions. Upon asking them about their experience of coding this data, coders described a variety of emotions while coding the data. These co-coders reported feeling angry at the experiences of rejection that happened to the gay men in this study, a sense of sadness regarding how isolating the experience of coming out can be, and they also expressed empathy for these parents. The co-coders stated that they were able to better understand why these parents struggled to come to place of acceptance. This understanding of the acceptance process helped temper their negative emotions so that they were able to provide unbiased coding.

**Confidentiality**

I engaged in measures to protect the confidentiality of all participants involved in this study. When utilizing ZoomPro®, I only recorded audio data so that the participant could not be identified through video data. In addition, all participants were given a
pseudonym that allowed me to gain valuable information without revealing the participant’s identity. Data from the participant was either recorded through ZoomPro® or through the use of a hand-held audio recorder that was utilized for in-person interviews. The recordings were transferred to a computer and a foot-pedal was utilized to aid in the transcription of the interview. The interview data was then deleted from all recording devices and identifying information was removed during transcription. All electronic information was stored on my password-protected computer and was given a pseudonym. All hardcopies were stored in a locked file cabinet. I protected all information gathered as a part of this study. However, interview transcripts were shared with my dissertation committee for the purpose of evaluation and direction.

Cultural Considerations

In regard to culture, grounded theory researchers also need to consider the cultural identities of their participants. This includes the participants age, any disabilities (whether congenital or acquired), religious affiliations, ethnic group affiliations, socioeconomic status, indigenous heritage, nationality, and gender. This list is in no way exhaustive (i.e., ADDRESSING model; Hays, 2016).

Grounded theory researchers place greater focus on the broader structural conditions that are at play in their participants’ lives. For example, while the focus of this study was on the codes, concepts, and categories that formed “acceptance”, this researcher also thought about how broader economic conditions affected their participants. The researcher also needs to consider their participants’ salient cultural values, their political views and trends, as well as any current social movements (Corbin
& Strauss, 1990). It is beneficial to consider how interactions between different systems influence the concept that is being studied.

Data Collection and Analysis

Instrumentation

The Researcher. The main method of instrumentation in qualitative research is the researcher. This is potentially problematic because the researcher brings with them a worldview and a set of biases that can have an impact on the creation of the study as well as the execution and interpretation of the results. However, these biases and their influence can be ameliorated through the use of the epoché process (Golafshani, 2003; Moustakas, 1994).

The epoché process, while originating in phenomenological research, has been utilized to provide a standard of quality in all forms of qualitative research. I engaged in this process and continued to monitor biases by writing memos throughout the data collection phase. The epoché process involved putting away my beliefs and understandings about particular behaviors or occurrences that happened in the data (Moustakas, 1994). This researcher engaged in this process by making a list of preconceived notions that he had regarding heterosexual parents of sexual minority children. This list served as a reference point when creating codes, concepts, and categories. The goal of referencing this list was to ensure that the created codes were not based in the researcher’s preconceived notions about the population of heterosexual parents of sexual minority children, thus making the data more defensible. Memo writing throughout the course of the data collection phase helped reinforce the epoché process.
The main goal of this process was to ensure that the established codes were not grounded in the researcher’s beliefs, but in the data itself (Moustakas, 1994).

**Semi-Structured Interview.** A semi-structured interview is a method of engaging with participants where the interviewer “attempts to elicit information from another person by asking questions. Although the interviewer prepares a list of predetermined questions, semi-structured interviews unfold in a conversational manner offering participants the chance to explore issues they feel are important” (Clifford, Cope, Gillespie, & French, 2016, p. 143). Essentially, I came to the interview with a list of questions that I believed would help further our understanding of the process that heterosexual parents engage in as they moved towards acceptance (see Appendix A for the list of interview questions). I asked these questions in a flexible manner. This means that when the participant began to describe relevant experiences that were not strictly connected to the proposed questions, they were still allowed to continue their explanation. I contend that I am not an expert on this issue, as a result, the participant’s thoughts were held as more important than the interview questions themselves. My background as a clinical mental health therapist was also beneficial in creating an environment of safety and comfort for the participant, allowing them to explore deep and meaningful experiences connected to the concept of acceptance. This style of interviewing lends itself to the exploratory nature of the qualitative process.

I recognize that while I had an idea of what I would like to focus on regarding heterosexual parents of sexual minority children, I do not know everything about the topic of acceptance because this population is largely hidden (Browne, 2005). The semi-structured interview allowed me to answer these questions, but more importantly, this
interview format allowed the participant to share their genuine experiences. This is crucial because the participants revealed ideas, themes, and concepts that I had not considered. Once these themes were revealed, I engaged in theoretical sampling so that the newly discovered themes and concepts could be expanded upon in the next interview.

Data Analysis

Grounded Theory. For this study, I utilized grounded theory methodology. The first reason for this is the nature of data collection and analysis that is involved in other approaches. For example, phenomenology acknowledges the use of “co-researchers” as opposed to participants. This may seem like a small distinction, however, in phenomenology the co-researchers are a critical part of the analysis. This can be seen in Humphrey’s (1991) project on the meaning of life. Once Humphrey completed his textural-structural analysis of the co-researcher’s experience, he sent the analysis to the co-researcher for feedback and edits (Moustakas, 1994). This process posed a problem for the study at hand. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic (i.e., “how did you come to accept your child’s sexual orientation?”), it is reasonable to believe that there was a social desirability bias (Fisher, 1993). If I allowed parents to make edits to my codes and ideas, they may have removed important components that did not show them in the best light (e.g., a parent who did not initially accept their child, made mistakes, and then came to accept their child). In order to truly understand the core categories involved in coming to accept one’s sexual minority child, I needed to prevent this bias from contaminating the data. Instead, I recruited doctoral and Master’s students to code alongside me for research internship hours. In this way, I was able to limit my own bias while not allowing the biases of participants to influence the data.
The second reason why I selected grounded theory over other methods is because grounded theory focuses more on the process involved in accepting sexual minority children. This is done by determining the codes, concepts, and categories relevant to an experience (Charmaz, 2014). In the case of this study, phenomenological research would have been more focused on the “essence” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 104) of acceptance. I did not want to walk away from this project having a greater understanding of what it means to feel acceptance. Rather, I wanted to know more about the conditions in which acceptance occurs, the personality traits that fostered that acceptance, the experiences that fostered acceptance, and the belief systems that fostered acceptance. Grounded theory was better poised to provide answers to these questions. More importantly, when the study was complete I had an identifiable pattern to give to clinicians who are working with families who are struggling to accept their sexual minority children. These clinicians could then focus on the core categories that have been identified as being crucial for acceptance.

**Research process.** The grounded theory process began with the first interview. I interviewed the selected participant for approximately 1-2 hours, engaging in the semi-structured interview process (i.e., asking listed questions, but also encouraging the participant to expand and offer relevant info that is not addressed in the interview questions). Once the first interview was complete, I immediately transcribed and analyzed the data through the process of open coding. This involves reading through the interview transcript and assigning meaning to each line of text; this is sometimes referred to as creating an emergent code, or a code that comes out of the text (Blair, 2015). After emergent codes were identified, I then identified themes that had arisen from the codes.
and compared them to one another, a process referred to as axial coding (Kolb, 2012). Once this was complete, I wrote a memo. These memos are my thoughts and predictions regarding the codes and concepts that eventually emerged from the data (Glaser, 1998). These memos were crucial for the theoretical sampling process. I identified themes and concepts from the first interview, and the first memo, that needed further exploration. I then selected the next participant based on their ability to address the newly discovered themes.

Once the second interview had been completed, I again transcribed and coded the data on a line-by-line basis (Blair, 2015). In addition, axial codes were identified and another theoretical memo was written describing the experience. I then engaged in axial coding again. However, this second round of axial coding involved comparing the codes discovered in the first interview to the codes discovered in the second interview (Kolb, 2012). The themes and categories that were discovered were then collapsed into each other in order to form new concepts. This process continued with each interview ending in a memo, and each new interview being compared to all other interviews. The qualitative researcher continues this process until they reach saturation, or the point where no new themes or concepts arise out of the data and the established themes and categories do not need revision even with continued interviews (Charmaz, 2014). I achieved meaning saturation. Discovering the themes involved in heterosexual parents’ acceptance of their sexual minority children did occur relatively quickly (e.g. code saturation). However, a deeper understanding of how these themes connected required more data. This ultimately led to a better understanding regarding how heterosexual parents moved to a place of acceptance.
Validity

Validity does not exist as a universally agreed upon concept in qualitative research (Winter, 2000). In fact, some authors suggest that qualitative researchers should move away from the term validity and instead adopt the term “defensible” (Johnson, 1997, p. 282). Grounded theory researchers can engage in defensible research by ensuring the codes, concepts, and categories are grounded in the actual data. In other words, they must be able to identify codes and the corresponding raw data that were used to create them. This means that the grounded theory researcher must be vigilant in ensuring that the codes are grounded in the data and not the author’s beliefs or perceptions about the topic of study. The process of checking and setting aside bias can be achieved through engagement in the epoché process (Moustakas, 1994; Golafshani, 2003).

Another component to consider in regard to validity involves the use of triangulation. Triangulation involves combining various methods as a way of enhancing the defensibility and credibility of a study (Patton, 2002). However, the use of triangulation in qualitative research is not an agreed upon strategy. Some researchers believe that triangulation does not fit well because each form of qualitative research (i.e. phenomenological, grounded theory, etc.) has its own system of analyzing data as well as its own theoretical framework (Babour, 1998). In regard to triangulation I focused on the intersection between constructivism and triangulation. From a constructivist perspective, triangulation involves the collection of shared experience in regard to the topic of study (Johnson, 1997). This means that triangulation did not only occur naturally by obtaining the accounts of multiple participants with shared experience, but by also involving
another researcher (i.e., a doctoral/master student working on research internship hours) I
was able to engage in the process of triangulation simply by using their input
(Golafshani, 2003).

Reliability

Similar to validity, the concept of reliability and its use in qualitative research is
not universally agreed upon. In fact, some authors believe that if reliability is held as a
standard for a qualitative study, then the study itself will be worthless (Stenbacka, 2001).
Instead of focusing on reliability, authors believe that researchers should examine
credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Charmaz (2014) provides the following questions
that grounded theory researchers should ask when attempting to determine the credibility
of their study:

- Has your research achieved intimate familiarity with the setting or topic?
- Are the data sufficient to merit your claims? Consider the range, number,
  and depth of the observations contained in the data.
- Have you made systematic comparisons between observations and
  between categories?
- Do the categories cover a wide range of empirical observations?
- Are there strong logical links between the gathered data and your
  argument and analysis?
- Has your research provided enough evidence for your claims to allow the
  reader to form an independent assessment—and agree with your claims?

(Charmaz, 2014, p. 337)
In addition, the process of *constant comparative analysis* in grounded theory research can help achieve consistency of the data by corroborating the codes established by the researcher with the data itself (Campbell, 1996; Golafshani, 2003).

**Ethical Issues**

In regard to grounded theory specifically, several ethical implications are present as detailed by Potrata (2010). One concern is the use of multiple coders. In this instance, the coders may be more concerned with making sure that their codes match, versus highlighting the differences between their codes and the implications of those differences. In the current study, I navigated this concern by instructing my co-researchers (i.e., doctoral/master student) on how to appropriately code the data so that they avoided bias. Another challenge in grounded theory research is the inductive nature of the data. After coding only a few interviews, the researcher is quickly consumed by data that must be organized in order to maintain efficiency. I had a multitude of codes and while some of them enhanced my understanding of a particular phenomenon, others went in a direction that was not the original goal of the study. This was especially problematic when writing an IRB proposal as the goal and direction outlined in the proposal was not necessarily the direction that the research took. Grounded theory research makes completing IRB proposals a distinct challenge (Potrata, 2010).

An ethical concern for this study was the affective nature of qualitative research. Due to the fact that the interviews were semi-structured, and the use of theoretical sampling invariably caused the questions to change somewhat throughout the course of the project, it was impossible to predict how participants would respond to the interview process. Given the sensitive nature of this study, where the researcher essentially assessed
and documented the bond between parent and child, it was anticipated that participants would have strong emotional reactions to the interview questions (Potrata, 2000). This means that in the consent forms and IRB proposal I had to detail how the interview process could have been emotionally stressful.

**Limitations of this method**

One clear limitation of any qualitative method is the inability to generalize to the population as a whole (Rennie, Phillips, & Quartaro, 1988). Qualitative research does not have the statistical power, nor the numbers that would allow the researcher to generalize their findings to an entire population. However, this is not the goal of qualitative methods. Instead, the qualitative researcher is focused on finding rich data that will highlight the experience of a phenomenon, the structure of that phenomenon, and situations in which that phenomenon occur. Grounded theory attempts to create a theory out of a particular concept or experience.

The richness that is a strength of grounded theory studies is also a weakness. The research community criticizes grounded theory because instead of utilizing scientific methods (i.e. hypothesis testing), grounded theory relies on conceptualization of the data (Rennie et al., 1988). Grounded theory may have an element of defensibility (Johnson, 1997), but this does not absolve the method from the push for objectivity (Rennie et al., 1988). There are even qualitative researchers who view grounded theory as lacking in necessary rigor (Charmaz, 2000; Fassinger, 2005).

**Researcher Perspective**

I have an extensive set of professional and personal experience regarding the topic of acceptance and the LGBTQ+ community. I am an active therapist in the St. Louis
community and I see clients at a private practice in South City. I have worked extensively with LGBTQ+ clients who are struggling with their sexual identities. Many of the issues these clients are facing are connected to the perceptions of family members as well as the beliefs of certain religious organizations. I have worked with these clients to help them move to a place of self-acceptance through the use of therapeutic tools such as the GRACE Model (Bozard & Sanders, 2011). In addition, I frequently confront unhealthy societal expectations that act as a barrier to self-acceptance and congruence for sexual minority individuals (i.e., gay male clients that feel they need to hide all feminine characteristics in order to experience acceptance). I have also done extensive reading on this topic and have attempted to highlight the experience of heterosexual parents of sexual minority children by utilizing the lens of attachment theory in order to better understand the relationship dynamics between parent and child.

I also carry a set of personal experiences that are intimately intertwined with this topic. I came out as a cisgender gay male during the Spring of 2008. At that time my parents were not accepting of my sexual orientation and attempted to send me to corrective therapy. This study is born out of the desire to better understand the process that my parents went through, as well as a drive to ensure that other sexual minority children with heterosexual parents will not have to endure dangerous forms of therapy (i.e., corrective/reparative therapy). To that end, I hope that this study can better inform the clinical work of therapists working with families who are struggling to accept their sexual minority children. These experiences have led to biases that I have become aware of as I designed this study. These biases include:
1. The lack of acceptance expressed by heterosexual parents of sexual minority children is a result of the beliefs and cognitive processes held by the heterosexual parents.

2. Attachment patterns are associated with the level of acceptance expressed by heterosexual parents.

3. Moving heterosexual parents to a place of acceptance will enhance not only the relationship between parent and child, but the mental well-being of the child.

4. Religion will be negatively associated with the levels of acceptance expressed by heterosexual parents.

5. Atypical gender expression will be negatively associated with the levels of acceptance expressed by heterosexual parents.

I have worked to remain open to other possible explanations and to set aside the listed biases. It has been important for me to note that my own experiences with acceptance and rejection are not generalizable to other sexual minority children. In addition, I recognize that the lack of acceptance or connection between heterosexual parents and their sexual minority children may be more strongly associated with the quality of their relationship (i.e., attachment) and less with the child’s identity as a sexual minority. In addition, when considering religion, I acknowledge that there are some faith traditions that are more accepting of sexual minority orientations. These traditions may then be less associated with the lack of connection between parent and child and may even work to strengthen the relationship.
Chapter 3: Results

This study was an examination of the factors, emotions, experiences, and forces that helped lead heterosexual parents of gay sons to a place of acceptance regarding their son’s gay identity. Through the use of a semi-structured interview process, 16 parents shared their experiences coming to terms with their son’s identity. From those interviews, 15 were selected for use in this study. The 16th participant was rejected due to expressing acceptance when their child came out. All parents identified as heterosexual and stated that they struggled initially to accept their son’s sexual orientation. In addition, all of the sons in this study were male and identified as gay. A demographic summary of the participants can be found below (Table 3.1). These interviews went through the process of transcription, open-coding, axial-coding, and confirmation coding. This resulted in the creation of five categories related to the process of coming to acceptance, and 14 sub-categories detailing the properties and dimensions that either impeded or encouraged acceptance. This chapter describes these categories and sub-categories.

Table 3.1
Parent Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Son’s Identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alpha</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Gay Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beta</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Gay Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gamma (couple A)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Gay Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delta (couple A)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Gay Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epsilon</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Gay Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zeta</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Gay Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eta (couple B)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Gay Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theta (rejected)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iota (couple C)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Gay Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kappa (couple C)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Gay Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lambda (couple B)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Gay Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mu (couple D)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Gay Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nu (couple D)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Gay Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xi</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Gay Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omicron</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Gay Man</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Category One: Emotions

All of the participants in this study cited some form of emotional response to their son coming out. These participants either openly stated that they expressed a particular emotion, or the emotion was identified as part of the coding process. The particular emotion expressed set the stage for how the parent experienced their son’s coming out process and then shaped their behavioral response. These participants first experienced a distancing from their son due to their emotional responses. These emotions have been labeled initial emotional reactions and represent one of the two sub-categories under Emotions. These emotions were what the parents initially felt upon hearing that their son was gay. However, after the expression of these emotions, parents were left with the fallout of their emotional response. Once they had experienced distancing from their son and recognized the damage that had been done to the relationship, certain emotion-laden behaviors were “triggered”. These behaviors represent the second sub-category and have been labeled recovery experiences. It is in these experiences that parents began to sort through their feelings surrounding their son’s gay identity and make changes in the relationship with their son. They processed the initial shock of their son’s coming out and moved toward rebuilding the relationship. The initial emotional reactions experienced upon their son’s coming out, and the recovery experiences are displayed in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2
Emotions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subcategory</th>
<th>Property</th>
<th>Dimension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Initial Emotional Reactions</td>
<td>a. Fear</td>
<td>(absent to present)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Shock</td>
<td>(absent to present)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. Denial</td>
<td>(absent to present)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d. Empathy</td>
<td>(absent to present)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Initial Emotional Reactions Experienced Upon Son’s Coming Out

The following 9 emotions were frequently cited by parents upon initially hearing that their son identified as gay and are expressed as properties of this category: (1) Fear; (2) Shock; (3) Denial; (4) Empathy; (5) Embarrassment; (6) Sadness; (7) Anger; (8) Overwhelmed; (9) Guilt

**Fear.** Fear was the most frequent emotion expressed by parents upon hearing that their son was gay. However, the reasoning for that fear differed from participant to participant. Many parents cited *fear for safety*, in that they were worried about the physical well-being of their son (i.e., physical violence, recognizing that gay men face discrimination in society, HIV/AIDS, etc.). In addition, some parents cited *fear of progression*, believing that their son’s gay identity would impede their progress through life. Some parents cited *fear of community rejection*, whether that be from their friends, family, or religious institutions. The main worry was that their son, their family, or they themselves would be judged due to the gay identity of their son. Other parents also commented on *fear of peer support* meaning that they were concerned that once their son
came out, their son would lose friends and become isolated from others. For those parents with religious identities, \textit{fear for the fate of their son’s soul} was also prevalent. They were concerned that their son’s gay identity would cause a loss of spirituality and their son would become disconnected from their higher power. Lastly, some parents cited \textit{misplaced fear} or fear that surrounded an inaccurate assumption regarding what it means to identify as a gay man (i.e. conflating sexual orientation with gender expression and being afraid that their son was transgender and would identify as a woman). One parent provided a summary of all of the concerns and fears he had when his son identified as gay:

I think I was afraid. I was afraid for him. I was afraid for us. I was afraid for how he would be able to cope with and deal with this, and I was afraid for the potential of him contracting HIV/AIDS, and I was still afraid for how we would be viewed as parents by friends in our community. (Iota 101-104)

\textbf{Shock.} While many parents did have an inclination that their son might be gay, a common theme was being surprised by the news. It appears as though a conflation between sexual orientation and gender expression occurred for one parent. In this situation, the parent assumed their son’s sexual orientation based off their gender expression.

We'd play ball, he played football. He was good at what he did. You know, I didn't have any thought until that day, and then you know, it's like somebody throwing water in your face. Ok, what's going on here? (Epsilon 85-88)
In another situation, shock occurred not only because the parent was unaware that their son was gay, but also due to the fact that they discovered their son’s sexual orientation by accident.

I got up one morning and went into the den area where the computer was and found a love letter that he had written to some guy on the computer, and that's how I found out. So, my response was total shock, just absolute, total shock, you know? I think a lot of parents probably had some kind of suspicion, but I did not have a clue. He had totally...kept it from us and if he had dropped clues I never picked up on them. (Lambda 12-17)

The experience of shock appears to be related to other themes that will be discussed later (i.e., loss of heterosexual future). Shock made it difficult for many parents to focus on the needs and concerns of their son because they were caught off guard and could not process their own emotions. This led to emotional reactions that created experiences of rejection for their son. One mother reported experiencing this after finding out, by accident, that her son is gay.

Well, I had no idea. He was staying with me at the time, and I overheard a conversation he was having. I asked him about it afterwards, so he explained it to me, and I had never experienced anything like this before, so I was totally surprised, and I don't think I really knew how to react. (Beta 7-10)

This same parent then described the confusion and uncertainty she felt over having to process something she did not ever believe would become a reality “I think I was just not sure where to go, so I kind of secluded myself for you know.... a couple days! Didn't go to work. I just didn't know how to process it. You know?” (Beta 15-17). The experience
of this parent resonates throughout this study as many rejection experiences were born out of shock where the parent simply did not know how to respond to their son’s disclosure of a gay identity, and, as a result, ended up rejecting their son as a side effect of needing to process their own emotions.

Denial. The emotional reaction of denial showed up when parents were not ready to take on the reality that their son is gay. In many ways, by not accepting that their son is gay, they did not have to deal with that truth. One parent admitted to denial immediately upon being asked what emotions she felt at the time “It had crossed my mind, but I shoved it away.” (Pi 10). Another parent experienced a much stronger reaction to the shattering of their current reality and being forced to come to terms with the fact that her son is gay: “He was a freshman in college and told me on the phone. I seriously wanted to die. I always knew he acted different from his brother and tried to ignore it all his life.” (Omicron 4-5). Another parent was able to put more words to the thought process, referring to the fact that she always saw her son hanging out with men and that he never had any women in his life.

I always had that thought in my mind. You know? Because he never dated; he was always with guys. So…. you know? But you know in the back of your mind…. you just kind of ignore it, you know, thinking: "Nah, that ain't it." (Mu 7-9)

Even when the participants did see the signs denial was still a frequent experience. One parent discusses her experience of recognizing the signs that her son was gay, but still could not bring herself to acknowledge his gay identity. She struggled to identify the feeling that came with finally knowing the truth and having to come to terms with it.
Even though we saw it coming....to me it was just kind of deflating, you know? You saw it but, you were thinking: "Oh, maybe that won't happen" and all of a sudden, you're just hit with it. Even though (husband) and I had talked about it, you know? This and that, but still once it happens to you....I don't want to say "disappointed" but I don't have a word there. (Xi 58-62)

Many parents also struggled to move past their denial even after hearing the truth. One father cited how he had suspicions but that he attempted to ignore them. However, when his son came out and he was faced with the reality, he could not do much more than simply acknowledge that his son was gay. He then discontinued the conversation upon his son confirming his gay identity. In addition, this parent also had their denial fueled by the inaccurate belief that a person could not be gay if they had engaged in sexual behavior with another person who was a different gender:

Deep down inside I always thought that. First of all, he moved in with a bunch of his friends. Good guys. Good guys. There was no involvement with any female--well, no, I take that back. There were female friends of theirs, Ok? So....you kind of....push it off....Then one day it was just me, him, and his mom and I just came out and asked him, I said: "Are you gay?" and he said: "yes" and I asked him, I said: "Have you ever been with a woman?" and he said yes, and that's where--I just dropped it right there. (Nu 11-17)

This same father continued to hold on to denial and hold out hope that his son may come around to being heterosexual. Again, similar to the example above, the parent is focusing on his son’s involvement with women as the determining factor of sexual orientation.
I mean he...one time he sent us a video, of course he was drinking with a doctor friend of his, and it was female, and I said: "Oh crap! Oh yeah! Oh shit! Here we go! Maybe! Maybe!" You know? You never know! Of course, that wasn't the case but, you know.... (Nu 433-436)

Denial appears to be strongly linked to the sub-category of loss of heterosexual future which is discussed later in this work. Denial is the vehicle by which parents maintain the heterosexual picture they have envisioned for their son. If they deny the signs that their son is gay, then a heterosexual future is still a possibility.

**Empathy.** Whereas the other emotions identified in the study served as barriers, empathy was one emotion that served a positive role and facilitated the reconnection between parent and child. Empathy was the only emotion that occurred that indicated movement towards acceptance. This involved participants taking the time to truly think about what their son was going through as they engaged in the coming out process. For some parents, empathy quickly appears after their son’s coming out event and helped provide clarity. Even though the parent didn’t fully understand what their son was going through, they recognize that it must have been difficult: “I can’t imagine people who didn’t have their parents’ support” (Pi 30-31). Some participants were able to describe an emotional reaction to their son’s struggle, feeling distraught while watching their son come to terms with his gay identity: “He only signed up for football in an attempt to get his father's approval... My heart broke for him” (Omicron 54-55). Expressions of empathy were an important part of the acceptance process for parents. If parents were able to recognize that their son was in pain, then they were typically able to re-orient their thought process towards the well-being of their son, versus their own internal struggle.
This helped participants come to terms with their son’s identity. One parent openly acknowledges this as part of her struggle and criticized herself for being selfish: “I’m not going to think about him. Not--"what are they going to do to him?" Nah--"what are they going to think about me?" (Zeta 138-140).... “You know? Selfishness. It was all selfishness” (Zeta 150). Similar to this particular participant, when parents were able to acknowledge what their son was going through, they were able to express more compassion for their son’s experience.

**Embarrassment.** Another common emotion that served as a barrier was embarrassment. Many parent’s did not necessarily feel anger towards their son for their sexual orientation, but kept it a secret because they felt it indicated a failing on their part: “I actually kind of....kept it on the down-low. I wouldn't admit to it. I was still embarrassed. I have a gay son, I'm embarrassed” (Zeta 55-63). Embarrassment also showed up in a behavioral sense, with participants frequently distancing themselves from their son once they officially came out: “After I found out....you know....and you put that wall up, that first year or so you know? I imagine he felt, you know, more distant....that I was more distant (Epsilon 782-788)”.

For some parents, embarrassment was focused on a particular aspect of the son’s sexual identity, such as sexual intercourse. Envisioning their son engaging in same-sex sexual intercourse was something that two fathers reported needing to process in order to come to terms with their respective son’s sexual orientation:

“Well do you ask your daughter about her sex life?" "Oh hell no!" I said: "I don't ask my son either"….and it's like.... it’s like a fucking light bulb goes on in these
people and they start thinking: "oh". So that's my standard line nowadays (Epsilon 556-562)

A similar experience happened to another father:

Well your son, you know, this and that and...." and I go: "Well Tony, what do you want to know? What is it you really want to know? Do you want to know what goes on in the bedroom?" I said: "if you want to know--" I kind of blasted him. I said: "you really want to know what's going on in their bedroom? Because I don't want to know what's going on in your bedroom. So why do you care?" (Iota 628-632)

In both situations, the participants came to the realization that they do not want to know about the sex lives of any of their children, gay or straight. They then utilized a logical argument when confronted by members of their community. Embarrassment initially appears while parents were struggling with the news that their son was gay. However, as time progressed, these parents processed their fears by acknowledging logical ideas that are not based in emotion (i.e., “I don’t want to know about the sex lives of any of my children”). A mother in this study also shared a similar experience when she came to terms with her son’s sexual orientation, she acknowledges same-sex sexual intercourse:

I could not....during the 6 weeks that he was gone I did a lot of thinking....and I said to myself: "What I do behind closed doors is my business. What he does behind closed doors is his business", as long as he's a good person (Zeta 44-46)

For this parent, coming to terms with respecting her son’s privacy was an important part of moving through her embarrassment. She also then focused on the positive qualities that her son embodies, such as the fact that he is a good person. This idea was more important than his gay identity.
Sadness. A common experience for participants upon their son coming out was feelings of sadness. The reason for their sadness varied from parent to parent. However, much of the experience was related to the theme of losing the heterosexual future that they had envisioned for their son (discussed later in this chapter). Many parents experienced this sadness as a crushing weight: “I was heartbroken. I don't know, I just hated to hear it” (Mu 6). Sometimes the sadness stemmed out of beliefs regarding what they thought their son’s life would look like. For example, one father expressed a concern that his son would be alone in life due to his gay identity. The thought of his son being alone was the source of his sadness: “it's probably one of my biggest disappointments for him personally that he's never been able to find that long-term partner” (Delta 315-317). In other situations, sadness came as an outpouring of emotion, as the parent attempted to come to terms with the fact that their son is gay. One parent could not bring herself to discuss the situation with anyone because of her sadness: “I mean I cried a lot....but no I didn't have a conversation” (Zeta 1130-1131). Another participant was so impacted by sadness that they experienced issues with their mental health:

I don't know, at first, I felt nauseated. You know? Just like--because I had some bouts of depression myself. Different times, even before that, and this sure didn't help that any at the time. I'm not saying if I was justified in that. I'm just telling you how initially it hit me you know? Almost like--I don't know how to put things in words very good--but almost like a death in the family, only, thank God it wasn't that. (Eta 10-15)

Some parents also struggled to describe what it was they felt. One mother did not have feelings directed at her son, but struggled with the sadness that came with finally being
forced to realize that her son was gay. She used the word “deflated” to describe how she experienced this revelation:

“But I just don't have the word for that. I think just "deflated" you know?

"Defeated" it’s like when you just all of a sudden, all that you were thinking has come to a head and it was a lot to take, you know? Even though we saw it coming. It's still hard to take” (Xi 67-70)

**Anger.** Anger was a very common emotion for participants upon discovering their son’s gay identity. However, the reason for that anger varied from parent to parent. For one participant their anger had a spiritual source:

It was a tremendous sense of betrayal and I still don't have my head wrapped around the whole gay thing. Being raised in a....real conservative, Evangelical Church, and a pastor in an evangelical--you know, and I believe the Bible cover to cover so--and I also believe--maybe now more so than ever, that (son) truly is a believer, but it's hard for me to wrap all that together you know? I don't know, I guess I was maybe even angry and disappointed at God. You know, I don't think I'm homophobic but....why my son, you know? (Eta 15-22)

For some parents, anger was simply the go-to response before other emotions came into play. This was the case for one parent who expressed anger after finding a love letter in her son’s car: “Then naturally I went in the house, went down in his room and raised hell. I was pissed. I told him to get out. He went and stayed at his Dad’s for 6 weeks” (Zeta 20-25). Other parents attempted to direct their anger towards a tangible experience and blame their son’s gay identity on that experience, stating that their son had “turned” gay:
“He was a freshman in college and told me on the phone. I seriously wanted to die. I always knew he acted different from his brother and tried to ignore it all his life. His father was very angry and thought he went away to college and turned gay”

(Omicron 4-6)

**Overwhelmed.** Feeling flooded or overwhelmed by the news of their son’s gay identity was also a common experience for parents. Some of these parents reported shutting down and isolating themselves from others while they took time to process. One mother discusses being overwhelmed by her son’s gay identity and needing space:

I....thank God that I wasn't working cause I really thought I would drive into one of those medians…. because I just couldn't deal with it. So I'm being very honest, I couldn't deal with it I could not.... during the 6 weeks that he was gone I did a lot of thinking.... (Iota 31-45)

In situations such as this, it appears as though damage was done to the relationship due to the parent not knowing how to process their feelings and therefore pushing everyone, including their son, so that they could process. The pushing away of their son does not appear to be a direct indication of rejection, but a defense mechanism as the parent copes with the news.

Overwhelmed participants also cited a sense of helplessness upon hearing that their son was a gay. One parent described the helpless feelings she had while watching her son struggle to come to terms with his own identity:

I watched him struggle throughout his life attempting to keep a relationship. He even wrote about it in an English assignment and discussed it with his teachers. I watched girlfriend after girlfriend break up with him after a few weeks because
other guys told them: “your boyfriend is gay”. (Son) always treated his girlfriends like a princess and bought them gifts. I felt so helpless seeing him suffer. He even asked his teachers, “What's wrong with me?” He was the perfect husband any girl could ever dream of having, and all the girls’ mothers wanted their daughters to marry him. (Omicron 17-28)

Guilt. Guilt occurred when parents began to recognize the struggle that their son was going through as they came out as gay. This emotion was also closely related to empathy. In many ways, these two emotions were a different side of the same coin. Empathy was the more positive identification of emotions that helped them connect with their son’s experience, while guilt was the negative reflection on how the participant was not there for their son while they went through the coming out process. One parent expressed guilt over a hateful letter that she wrote to her son upon finding out that he was gay:

I regret every bit of it. I wrote him a 5-page letter. I don't know if he told you that. Oh, I wrote him a 5 page letter sent it to him. "I gave birth to a son to get married and give me grandkids not to....blah blah blah blah". Five pages of just....I regret that (laughs) and this has been so many years ago. You know? I mean he's 40 now and that was when he was 17, and I, to this day, still regret that. (Zeta 345-364)

Another parent had more of a religious focus in terms of her regret. She recalled things she had said prior to her son coming out and experienced guilt over her lack of knowledge on what it means to be gay. In addition, she regrets the inaccurate knowledge she shared with others:
I have felt so bad because I have looked back on my life and I can remember when I was teaching High School Sunday School one time, and the lesson was on homosexuality and she said: "Well my Aunt's gay" and I said: "Well she needs to repent" You know? She needs to change. She said: "She's my Aunt and I love her" and I said: "I can't help it if you do" You know? "She just needs to get her life right" and I'm thinking: "What a self-righteous bitch" you know? (laughs) you know?

The same mother also discusses how she felt guilt surrounding the things she said to her own son. She stated that much of what she did was out of pain, and how disorienting that pain was. Looking back on the situation with a clear head, she was able to recognize how hurtful she was:

Yeah. Yeah. "That was a really dumbass thing to say" but you know it's not meant to be hurtful; you know? Which if you would think about it, you would know that it was hurtful, but it--you're coming out of your hurt yourself and trying to think what to say and, you know, don't even know (Lambda 895-898)

Parents of gay sons experienced a wide range of emotional reactions when their son came out of the closet. However, there appears to be a pattern in how parents processed these emotions. All of the parents in this study reported needing time and space to process the news. In terms of fear, parents need time to confront their fears and realize that many of those fears were irrational. Shock, anger, and feeling overwhelmed were all emotions that were initially intense but wore off over with time and dissipated when parents began to process what their son’s identity actually means for their son and for their family. Denial, embarrassment, and sadness all appear to have been born out of
HETEROSEXUAL PARENTS THAT MOVE TOWARD ACCEPTANCE

shame which was related to their lack of knowledge and beliefs regarding what it means to be a gay man. The participants in this study eventually came to a place where they experienced guilt as the realized that they were focused on their own pain and did not consider the pain that their son was going through. This then led parents into a place of empathy, a key emotion that provided fuel for the next phase of their journey, recovery.

Recovery Experiences

Upon hearing that their son identifies as gay, parents expressed a variety of emotions. However, once parents had time to adjust, their ultimate response depended upon their residual emotional affect and several already established factors. The recovery experiences of parents and how they reconciled their son’s sexual identity depended upon two factors: the personality traits of the parents themselves, and the current stability within their family system. The emotions participants felt fueled the way in which they coped with their son’s gay identity.

Selflessness. One main indicator of how parents were going to react to their son’s gay identity is the level of selflessness they expressed. Essentially, was the parent able to think about their son’s experience? Or were they consumed by their own wants, desires, and beliefs? Selflessness appears to help parents move into a place of acceptance more quickly than those parents who did not have a selfless attitude. Several factors comprised selflessness including: protecting family, parent providing support, and son’s happiness.

Protecting Family. One way in which parents display selflessness was by being protective of their son, even if they did not totally understand or agree with their gay identity. One parent detailed how she was willing to cut her own mother out of her life for the sake of her son:
when my mom was really bad in my house, like talking about this stuff and I was
like I'm not--I'm not doing this. Like I will cut my mother (laughs) out and I will be
with my son and I gave him a choice. I was like: "listen if you want me to....do this
and take this stand.... (Alpha 329-332)

Family rejection due to their son’s gay identity was a reality for some parents. In these
situations, participants in this study choose to create boundaries around those family
members, such as one father who distanced himself from family after they refused to
come to his son’s wedding:

There's a lot of people we haven't talked to since that wedding because of--in the
family--not immediate, but....did (family member) come? (crosstalk with wife).
Yeah, that's my one sister that I don't talk to. She didn't come either and that--she
was (son's) Godmother and I haven't forgiven her for that and (son) doesn't know
this stuff. He doesn't know that we've kind of disassociated with parts of the family
because of that, and I really don't want him to know. It's, you know, I don't want
him to think that was the righteous thing to do. It was righteous in my mind.

Doesn't need to be righteous in his mind (Epsilon 1313-1323)

In situations such as this, participants made decisions about their son’s well-being as a
means of protecting them from discrimination and harm. In this instance, the participant
chose not to tell their son because they felt as though him knowing could cause pain and
conflict. In the participant’s mind, separating from un-accepting family members was
simply the right thing to do.

**Parent providing support.** Selfless parents were also more willing to provide
support to their son after their son came out as a gay. Their son’s identity as a gay man
did not change the fact that they were still invested in their son and loved them. One father in particular discusses how he was there for his son by making sure that he had solid employment:

we had been trying to work with him to get into some kind of different job situation, and we had some connections with AT&T so it helped--we helped him through those connections to get a job with AT&T which he has turned into a very good job (Delta 33-36)

Many parents struggled with the sexual component of their son’s gay identity. However, one participant was able to look beyond this and continue to provide support to their son in territory that is difficult for many parents to discuss:

I think at that point we were much further along in acceptance and I just basically cautioned him that, you know, you can't be going to public facilities like that to meet people or to have a hook-up or what-not, you know, be safer than that. Be much, much more under control. I always try to encourage him, I said: “regardless of even myself and my wife, you have to know who your partner is (laughs). Make a connection through a dating process. Don't be so flippant about whether you're going to date a male or going to date a young woman....know something, because that connection goes beyond just being sexual.” (Iota 222-229)

This participant was able to see past his son’s gay identity and acknowledge that his son still needs healthy relationship advice. He was then able to provide support to his son with compassion and understanding.

**Son’s happiness.** Another important component of selflessness was the ability of the parent to focus on their son’s level of happiness. For some participants, recognizing
that their son was happy made all the difference when it came to accepting their gay identity. For one particular participant, she was able to recognize that coming out as a gay man did not only make her son happy, but her friend’s children were also happier when they came out as well:

You know happy for him because he's happy. Uh...and Oh! I have another friend....she has two daughters who are gay--you might talk to them too. So, and they live up the street too, but she said....her one daughter is married and she told her husband who had a hard time accepting it. She said it's the first time I can remember all four of our kids being happy. Which....you know, it’s the outlook I take. (Son) is happy! (Gamma 222-241)

Another parent reflected on the fact that their son was being their authentic self and that he is free to live his own life. In addition, the parent was able to see that his son is a kind and caring member of society that is constantly working to help others:

Well (trailing off).... So....you know at that point I guess that; at some point you just realize it's not your life. It's his life, you know? and he was doing good things and there's a lot of people that don't do good things (laughs) (Epsilon 405-408)

Throughout the acceptance process, it was common for parents to focus on the aspects of their son’s personality that were positive. This appears to function as a method of offsetting their discomfort or confusion surrounding their son’s gay identity.

**Parent Sub-system.** A major component of the reaction to their son’s gay identity had to do with the parent sub-system. The quality of the relationship between mother and father was a key facilitator in the acceptance process. In addition to how both parents consensualized their experience of their son’s gay identity was associated with their
acceptance of their son. Two components make up this particular property including: 

*father’s acceptance* and *mother magic.*

**Father’s acceptance.** In regard to this study, it appears as though fathers have a harder time coming to accept their son’s identity compared to mothers. It is possible that coming to terms with your son’s identity as a gay man is harder for heterosexual fathers to accept as they may believe that their son is losing their manhood by identifying as a gay man. This was the case for one father:

I think my husband was a little angry because as a father--I think it's harder when you have a son. It’s kind of like--I know (husband) thought our son was losing his manhood and it took him awhile for him and (son) to be able to, you know, be comfortable again with each other (Xi 64-67).

Another participant was very upfront about his belief that not only do fathers have a harder time coming to acceptance, they also are less likely to be aware of their son’s gay identity: “I didn't know he was gay, but she did. What were we discussing? (cross talk with wife). Yeah....Dads never know” (Epsilon 7-8). The lack of awareness of gay identity, coupled with the belief that their son is losing their manhood, made it more difficult for some fathers to come to a place of acceptance.

**Mother magic.** The term “mother magic” is utilized to represent the ability of mothers to not only recognize their son’s gay identity, but also to function as a support system for their husbands. Mothers appear to launch into a pattern of oscillation, going back-and-forth between their husband and son as a peacemaker of sorts, frequently critiquing their husband’s thought process while also asking their son to be patient as
their father sorts through his feelings. One mother reported having many conversations with her husband about their son:

It was hard on my husband, his dad, I think more than me. You know? We had talked about it and I think in your mind you think: "it can't be my son" and that's sad because.... you know, why can't it be your son? You know? I seriously believe that God, you know, made him that way (Xi 18-22).

This participant also extended these conversations with her husband beyond their son to the gay community at large, such as when they realized a gay couple lived in their neighborhood: “We just happened to move in and they were down below us and (husband) said: "Well, can you believe that?" and I'm like: "I'm sure they're very nice"”(Xi 219-220). This participant worked to keep all members of the family talking throughout the coming out process and set up very clear indicators regarding how the future of their relationship with their son would look: “I kept the conversation open. I told (husband) "I am not going to let him go. I'm not going to let him think that we don't love him."” (Xi 670-681). In addition, mother magic also involved a layer of compassion. In one instance, this participant was patient with her husband when he vocalized that he just could not understand a certain aspect of their son’s gay identity:

for the most part....it was (husband). It helped him because he struggled with it. I think--like I said, I think it was being a dad, but if I talked about it, he'd sit there and he'd listen. If he didn't, you know, agree with something he'd say: "I can't get past that yet". So, just us talking together, you know, we helped each other get through that (Xi 902-907).
Several of the fathers within this study also were open about the influence of their wives in terms of processing their son’s gay identity: “And I give all the credit to my wife, she was the one that said: “we need to support him”. She sensed that right from the very beginning, and she made me realize that too” (Delta 61-63); “you just start realizing things and you know (wife) helped me through this life, you know, she would always say: "look he's a good kid, he's doing this"--and you know (son's name) he's always helping somebody.” (Epsilon 155-158). The support offered by mothers to their husbands appears to be associated with fathers coming to accept their son’s gay identity, as well as a general movement of the family towards acceptance.

Attachment. The level of general closeness between participant and son also made a difference in terms of moving towards acceptance. Participants who were more attached to their son appear to move more quickly towards acceptance of their son’s gay identity. There were several components that we associated with attachment for participants: conflict, boundaries, level of communication.

Conflict. Conflict appears to be a normal part of all parent-son relationships and was seen throughout this study. In addition, many participants experienced conflict during the coming out process, such as one parent that struggled with their son’s new way of expressing themselves:

Well and we are a smaller town so my son wanted to put the rainbow flag on his car and I'm like "you can be who you are, and you can do this, but then you need to be aware of your surroundings”. You know? You don't want to be a target you have to have situational awareness....and then of course “my mom is anti-gay” anti-anything so that was hard too (Alpha 169-173)
In this instance the conflict was over the son’s need for self-expression, and the participant’s concern for their son’s safety and well-being. However, for other families, the conflict was less related to the son’s gay identity and more focused on personality differences. Within this study, many sons had a strained relationship with one parent and the other parent acted as a mediator. In one family, the son frequently experienced conflict with his father and his mother mediated between the two of them. The son’s mother explained this dynamic:

Usually it comes from (husband)'s side and then (husband) will say: "Well what did I say?" and then I have to explain it to him, what he said, and a lot of times he knows what the triggers are. He'll bring up politics or whatever, but both of them like to be the "thief of the light". Both of them expect the moon and the stars to revolve around them, and so when you get them in the same room, you know? It's too much. To get them started, and they know what triggers the other one, but they just can't keep their damn mouths shut, you know? (Lambda 342-353)

**Boundaries.** The participants in this study also acknowledges that there are natural boundaries in the relationship between parent and son. They then worked to respect these boundaries. One father discusses how he doesn’t interfere with his son’s romantic relationships: “But I've never asked him, I've never really pried into his....you know, relationship” (Epsilon 1246-1251). Another parent was direct in stating that she recognizes that her son has a right to privacy, and it is his right to keep certain things private if he chooses: “Just the fact that I told myself that what he does in his personal life is his business” (Zeta 171-172). This particular parent also went on to say that once she
had established this boundary with her son, and respected his decisions, their relationship changed significantly:

So he wasn't a 15-year-old trying to find himself, or a 13-year-old--he was 17. I'll tell you that was the turning point with me is when I finally told myself....that was it. What he does is his own business (Zeta 184-186)

**Level of Communication.** How frequently parent and son interacted also appears to play a role in the acceptance dynamic. Parents with increased closeness to their son reported more frequent contact with them and also appear to have more established rituals in terms of spending time together. One mother actually received a call from her son during the interview: “So I was the one who got up to--you know, and plus their wedding wasn't traditional (crosstalk). That was a call from (son) because we talk almost every day” (Kappa 130-132).

Parents with lower levels of acceptance appear to have lower levels of communication and less structure regarding when that communication occurs. One mother described the length of time that had passed since she had seen her son: “Because we haven't seen him since probably November (interview done 7/22/20). Something like that yeah. So, he didn't come home for Christmas, I still got his Christmas money (laughs)” (Mu 165-171). It is important to acknowledge other factors that have an impact on the level of communication, such as physical distance. However, those parents who appear to be more accepting seem to have more routine contact with their gay son.

**Expressing Affection.** Participants within this study frequently expressed affection for their son. It appears as though even with the conflict that they were experiencing in terms of accepting their son’s gay identity, the expression of affection for their son was
still a priority for these parents. The three main aspects of the expressing affection property were *pride, acknowledging son’s positive qualities, and sharing stories.*

**Pride.** Participants within this study were able to detail their son’s accomplishments and how these accomplishments led them to feel pride as parents. One mother detailed the pride she had in her son for being actively involved in extracurricular activities:

> He was every parent's dream. He went to Boy's State, Washington D.C., competed and won the record for Speech Trophies and I started the Speech and Drama Boosters for him as a freshman. He named one of our elementary schools with an essay contest, and he did everything I suggested. He made me so proud to be his mother! (Omicron 85-88).

One mother reflected on the experiences that she had with her two gay sons and mentioned the difficulties of the coming out process. However, she was able to normalize the experience and expressed pride in her sons:

> so it seemed like--I mean it was tumultuous like it is for almost everybody when they came out but now it’s kind of like, as you get to see them become people.... like.... having this sense of pride behind who they are. (Alpha 356-358)

**Acknowledging Son’s Positive Qualities.** Participants within this study also frequently identified aspects of their son’s personality that they enjoyed. This practice appears to be a way to focus on the positive aspects of their son’s personality. This was necessary as it helped participants navigate the negative thoughts and emotions that they experienced during the coming out process. One parent discusses how, after a period of time, she came to the realization that her son’s sensitive side actually facilitated the coming out process for her. His consistent patience and kindness as she sorted through
her feelings helped her move towards acceptance. She was able to realize that he is still
the same person, he has not changed: “there's no difference. You know? He's my sweet
boy! Yeah (laughs) I love him to pieces! He's so special!” (Beta 661-665). Participants
were able to describe in detail the qualities they loved about their son. One father was
able to give multiple examples detailing the kind and thoughtful person that his son is. He
was also able to acknowledge how much kinder his son had become after coming out:

He's the most loving man I've ever met. It never surprises me--if I start crying it’s
for a good reason--it never surprises me how thoughtful he can be....just out of the
blue. The things he'll do just for us out of the spur of the moment. Not just gifts and
stuff like that, but the things he says and the--he's sent lovely emails and other notes
and stuff like that and he's just-- a lot of times, he comes over for dinner, let's say
on a Sunday night, and he'll go out of his way to go stop and get flowers for Mom,
and you know, he's very thoughtful in that way--almost to a fault. I mean he'll be
late and then he'll stop for flowers then he's even later. But, you know, the thought
is there. You know, he's trying to be kind and he's--God--he's always been that way
but he's even more so now. (Delta 281-290).

**Sharing Stories.** Some participants choose to express affection through story
telling. In these instances, parents told loving, and potentially embarrassing stories about
their son. These memories functioned as treasured parts of their past and many parents
were excited to share these moments with this researcher:

Throw this at (son)--one time, we had a laminate floor there in the dining room and
I came home, and it looked like it was burnt with something. I said: "what
happened?" Well, he was friends with the little girl across the street, same age as
him, and he took hairspray with a lighter (whoosh noise) and just burnt it. Yes. Yes.

(Nu 702-706)

However, the stories that parents shared were not always warm and joyful. Some stories focused on the trials and obstacles that their son overcame and the admiration that they then felt for their son. One mother detailed an experience with her son where he struggled with a medical condition but was able to overcome it:

The other thing was something that he wasn't diagnosed with until he was 7, was that he had a lazy eye. I don't know if (husband) told you about that. We took him for an eye test because he kept tilting his head when he was reading and he'd always be so tired, and it ended up that he was practically blind in one eye. It wasn't how sometimes you think of a lazy eye as somebody who’s eyes drift? Like they have one eye that will drift off in a different direction? His wasn't like that. He just-One eye got stronger and stronger and the other got weaker. They didn't know if they could reverse it. For a year he wore a patch from the time he got up in the morning until he went to bed at night over his good eye. We were able to bring it up to 20/40. So, it's like a miracle that his vision returned in that eye. Yeah! He did that every day without complaining, and imagine a 7-year-old doing that?! He never complained. So now he'll wear glasses, but the one lens is just glass (Kappa 446-467)

**Desiring Closeness.** Wanting or desiring a close connection with their son was another commonality across participants. These parents showed amazing resilience in attempting to connect with their son and be with them—even when their son wanted nothing to do with them. One mother discusses the lengths she went to in order to
connect with her son, this included enduring unkind words and being ignored. She then spent hours talking with him, all in an attempt to repair their relationship:

So, but there was a, there was a Mother’s Day, and it’s been I don't know 5, 6 years ago something like that--my Mother’s Day card was not the normal beautiful card he gets me, and it had a letter in it that I wasn't--he said he was stepping back from the family and I didn't really know what that meant. Until we were down here at the lake and sees all of his family but me. I mean they would go right down through here with the pontoon....and not even look at me. So New Year's Eve that year....New Year's Eve I sent him an email and I said: "ok, we're starting a new year. Is this how it's going to be? This is crazy." You know? and he'd come back with--it was not a real nice email and stuff but, he kind of--not mean, hateful "I hate you, you're...." this kind of stuff and finally I said: "why don't we get together?"

Just him and I, and we met one night after work, at Friendly's--I don't know if you've heard him talk about Friendly's--stayed there till....shit I didn't get home till 2 o'clock in the morning. I had to get up and go to work the next day, because it was a work night. We talked a lot, so we did that. Couple times we would meet, just him and I and then (husband) come back, and (brother). (Zeta 517-529)

The desire to be close to their son also appears to pressure some participants into moving towards acceptance. This occurred when parents realized that they would miss out on their son’s life. One mother discusses how she wrestled with being comfortable meeting her son’s partner:

he has a partner who lives in like New Zealand who came to visit, and he stayed for like 6 months but we're in different states, so I didn't meet this person. It really
made me start thinking: "ok so what if he wants to bring his partner to my house?"
and I'm like: "I'd be ok. I'd be ok with that" and I think I'd like to work on opening
up conversations around his romantic relationships and his interests. I don't know
that he hides them, I don't know that boys just don't share with their moms. You
know? but I want to make sure that he knows like....yeah he can come here with
his.... (Alpha 436-447)

**Optimism.** Having an optimistic mindset also played a role in the participant’s
movement towards acceptance. For these parents, when they were faced with the negative
aspects of their son’s gay identity, they engaged in a more wholistic thought process.
They worked to see the bigger picture and how their son’s identity can actually be a
benefit. One father was able to see the bigger picture in terms of love. He described his
feelings about his son and his son’s partner:

> If you love somebody, you love somebody, and I'm happy for you. Because, we
> only get a short period of time on this planet and achieving that is probably one of
> the greatest things you can do for yourself….Is having the ability to love and be
> loved. (Iota 984-986)

One participant commented on the experiences and relationships that he would have
missed out on if he had rejected his son or had not been open to meeting members of the
gay community. He discusses how he made a friend through fundraising for his son’s
choir:

> Participant: there's usually about....5-10 people who are in the "money" category
> that we contribute in, and the two of us—(man's name) and us we tend to be, every
> year, in that category.
Online: Right

Participant: so something very good has come out of it.

Researcher: Right

Participant: the (chorus) from that

Researcher: Yeah. So not only was it not a barrier or an issue, it was actually something--

Participant: a positive

Researcher: a positive in fostering the relationship. That's really cool.

Participant: you see what we would have missed? If we hadn't accepted him?

**Humor.** The use of humor throughout the coming out process was unexpected. However, creating a sense of levity while going through the coming out process with their son appears to be a coping mechanism that was frequently accessed, especially by fathers. It also appears to help participants take on a more positive view of being gay and helped them relate to members of the gay community. One father discusses how he was able to engage in humor with a lesbian patient, ultimately enhancing their relationship:

But it wasn't until I got into private practice and started seeing lesbian patients and probably the funniest thing that ever happened is.... I’m doing a pelvic exam one time on a patient who was--she's, you know, a lesbian, and she knew, that I knew she was a lesbian. And so, unfortunately because of her age I'm doing a rectal exam and she's uncomfortable. She's squirming around and I said: "oh I'm sorry I'll hurry up" and she goes: "No, you don't have to hurry up" and then there was this pregnant pause....and we both broke out laughing (Delta 208-214).
Another father utilized humor throughout the coming out process, especially when he felt uncomfortable but wanted to communicate a sense of acceptance. He told a story about how he had attended his son’s bachelor party:

You know it’s funny because I wasn't sure if I could get away and when I finally decided....I kind of wanted to throw it as a surprise to him. You know? I think he was more shocked that I came out with him than anything, and I think that helped a lot, otherwise--how many gay guys does it take to put in a lightbulb? Just tell me that, right now (Epsilon 465-469)

The humor utilized by this participant, while crass, was meant to create comfort as well as create connection with the people around him.

**Compassion.** Compassion was the vehicle through which empathy was operationalized. Compassion was evident in many of the behaviors that parents engaged in. For one parent it meant not engaging in the discrimination and stigma that was reinforced by his profession as a member of law enforcement. This father recalls an incident where he was called to a scene at a truck stop where there was a report of a naked man walking around. He describes his interaction with this man:

Just to kind of identify what the hell is going on here, He self-identified as gay and that he was meeting up with a trucker. Our response to that was: "I really don't want any part of what you do, that's your life, blah, blah, blah. Get your clothes on, get in your car, and get out of here." Basically, just shooed him away. Yeah, I don't want to be bothered by bogging myself down and charging you with lewd behavior. It just wasn't my desire to make an arrest like that so.... (Iota 196-205)
In this situation, the participant had grounds to arrest the man and could have done so. However, he exercised compassion. The participant also acknowledges “sting” operations that target gay men cruising rest stop bathrooms and how a fellow officer was caught in one of these stings. He worked to distance himself from these types of operations. In regard to gay stings, he stated: “I mean I never actively participated in the enforcement of it myself.” Another participant expressed compassion by utilizing her counseling background to help her son process anti-gay microaggressions:

he would call with questions like: "is this--" I don't know how to say it so....he can recognize like microaggressions, and he'll call me and we would process those and we would just talk through them, like "yes this is wrong, what you're seeing is real" like "that was not ok" and maybe he's come to more....self-confidence in addressing these alone? We haven't really had those conversations in a while, but he used to come and say like: "I don't get it. I don't get it. What are these people doing? These heterosexuals....they're dumbasses" (Alpha 677-683)

This first category dealt with the emotional experience of parents upon discovering that their son is gay. Coming to terms with their son’s identity involved a variety of emotions including fear, shock, denial, empathy, embarrassment, sadness, anger, feeling overwhelmed, and feelings of guilt. These parents then worked to recover from this experience and found ways to incorporate their son’s identity into their family system. The participants prioritized healthy relationships, not only by building a healthy attachment with their son, but by working on the parental sub-system or the relationship between mother and father. The participants tended to these relationships by engaging in healthy behaviors with their son such as expressing affection, working to be close to their
son, having a selfless attitude when engaging with their son, and expressing compassion for their experiences as a gay man. In addition, when they were struggling to accept their son’s sexual orientation, they utilized the coping mechanisms of optimism and humor, working to see the positives in their situation while also bringing in a sense of levity when interactions with their son became tense. This category highlights the emotional labor involved in accepting a son who identifies as a gay man.

**Category 2: Parent’s Journey**

The second category in this study focuses on the lived experience of the participant. Throughout the interview process parents detailed events, beliefs, information, and work that they engaged in as they came to a place of acceptance. Combined, these aspects provide a complex narrative that ultimately led these parents to a new understanding and acceptance of their son and their gay identity. The sub-categories that comprise *Parent’s Journey* are: Knowledge, Loss of Heterosexual Fantasy, Self-Work, Parent Past, and Parent Present. The “Parent’s Journey” category is described in table 3.3.

**Table 3.3**

*Parent’s Journey*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subcategory</th>
<th>Property</th>
<th>Dimension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Knowledge</td>
<td>a. Gay Stereotypes</td>
<td>(not endorsed to endorsed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Misinformation</td>
<td>(absent to present)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. Awareness</td>
<td>(absent to present)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d. Resources</td>
<td>(absent to present)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e. Aware of Son’s Experience</td>
<td>(unaware to aware)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f. Sharing Learned Knowledge</td>
<td>(does not share to shares)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Loss of Heterosexual Fantasy</td>
<td>a. Marriage</td>
<td>(not desired to desired)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Grandchildren</td>
<td>(not desired to desired)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. Carrying on Last Name</td>
<td>(not desired to desired)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
d. Son’s Career  
(expectations not met to expectations met)

3. Self-Work  
<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Self-Education</td>
<td>(absent to present)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Reaching out for Support</td>
<td>(not sought to sought)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Self-Awareness</td>
<td>(absent to present)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Self-Care</td>
<td>(absent to present)</td>
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</table>

4. Parent Past  
<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Experience with gay individuals</td>
<td>(negative to positive)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Parent Present  
<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Current Political Beliefs</td>
<td>(unaccepting to accepting)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Coming Out Complications</td>
<td>(absent to present)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Relationship to Important People in Son’s Life</td>
<td>(negative to positive)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Knowledge**

The knowledge sub-category describes the information that parents gained along their journey. This knowledge helped illuminate the experiences of gay individuals as well as identified certain resources that parents found helpful (or resources they wish they had available) as they learned more about their son’s gay identity. In addition, this sub-category highlights the parents’ knowledge of their son regardless of their gay identity. The final aspect of the knowledge sub-category focuses not on the gaining of knowledge, but the sharing of what they have learned with others. The six properties of this sub-category are: Gay Stereotypes, Misinformation, Awareness of Gay Issues, Resources, Awareness of Son’s Experience, and Sharing Learned Knowledge.

**Gay Stereotypes.** Wrestling with gay stereotypes and separating out truth from fiction was a major part of the acceptance process. Some parents were aware of the many stereotypes that exist in mainstream society and were able to integrate that awareness with logic and reason. One mother commented on the belief that all gay men are promiscuous: “A lot of the misconceptions I think are that gay men are promiscuous and,
you know, well.... I don't know, I went to college and (laughing), I saw some pretty promiscuous women and men, you know, so that label doesn't fit.” (Kappa 103-106).

This participant was able to dispel the notion that all gay men are promiscuous by being able to examine the heterosexual community and come to the conclusion that there is a significant level of promiscuity there as well.

Beyond the awareness of the stigma and stereotypes that gay individuals face, is the fear of specific messages that society sends about who gay men are. One mother described the fears she had when her son initially came out. She remembers endorsing some of these messages as she attempted to figure out what it meant to be a gay:

You know? I didn't know the difference between being gay and being a child molester because in our religion everybody was lumped the same. You know? So, I'm thinking does he have, you know, attraction to little kids and here he's going to church camp where he's going to be the camp pastor, you know? So, it's just a shit mess. (Lambda 59-63)

One father had the experience of visiting a gay bar with his son. He acknowledges that he had ideas as to what he would find in that bar, but recognize that he was wrong in his assessment and that certain stereotypes were dispelled:

You know what's really funny and you.... again you have stereotypes growing up. That gay guys are like a fairy or stuff, you know? (slams table). We go in this gay bar and I'm looking, and I'm thinking...."these guys look like NFL football players" (laughs) you know? This isn't my idea of what I thought a gay bar would be like, you know? (Epsilon 664-672)
Misinformation. The property of misinformation dealt with inaccurate ideas and knowledge that appears within the interviews. This information was not necessarily related to stereotypes but highlighted the fact that many of the participants carry information and ideas about gay people that are incorrect. This information was not brought forward with malice, the participant simply thought that their information was true. One mother portrayed confusion regarding what makes someone gay:

Some people it's a choice they make but.... he said he knew when he was a teenager or whatever that he was gay so....to me that has to be something that was inside of him that he was born with. Then you blame yourself, you know: "Is this something I did wrong?" (Mu 65-68).

In the above example, the parent appears to be conflicted regarding what makes someone gay. She stated that some people do make a choice to be gay, indicating a social cause. However, she then also stated that her son knew he was gay when he was an adolescent, indicating a genetic source. She then finished by blaming herself as a parent, wondering if she had an impact on her son’s gay identity. Another participant also expressed similar misinformation regarding the origins of gay men, again wondering if aspects of society lead someone to be gay:

I always question his: "I was born like that" and I don't know if that's true or not. I don't know what kind of studies they have of that. I don't know if something happened during their life that changed them that way? Because I know some people that were married, have kids--that turned gay! Later, you know? I just don't know. It's probably a mystery we won't know, yeah, so.... (Nu 125-130).
This particular participant cited societal influences in terms of what makes someone gay, and then provided a personal example of individuals he knew that initially identified as straight and then later came to identify as gay. He utilizes the word “turned” indicating a belief that being gay is something that happens to you or is done to you.

**Awareness of Gay Issues.** Participants varied in their knowledge of gay issues. Some parents were able to acknowledge significant events in gay history, or recognize frequent problems experienced by gay individuals. Conversely, other parents appear to be unaware of the concerns facing the gay community. One parent with a higher level of knowledge recognizes the importance of allowing her son to go through the coming out process on his own:

But he told me.... oh, it's been a while back. He said: "Mom, I don't think you're going to realize this but.... I knew I was gay when I was 3 or 4” and he said: "I know. I should have talked to you about it" and I said: "Well, I kind of seen it coming". He said: "Well why didn't you say something?" I go: "Well it's not for me to say that, to call you that. I think that's something you need to say to me." (Xi 162-166)

In this example, the participant described how she had an awareness that her son might be gay. However, she recognizes that identifying her son as gay before he was ready was not her place. She knew that this was a process that he needed to go through and allowed him to go through it. Another participant described her awareness of gay issues and how certain tragic events triggered her identity as a mother and created a sense of fear as she realized her son can be harmed by society:
I think when I was pregnant with one of my older sons--it was probably around the time that the Matthew Shepard incident happened in Wyoming, "incident", minimizing--sorry, but it was impactful then. I don't remember the year that was but, I carry that story, just as a mom….Right? Just as a mom. Like never knowing that my son was gay, or would come out or--whatever, but that was impactful. I never watched the movie "Prayers for Bobby" but you know, kind of like putting all these pieces together that--"I could lose my sons. I could lose my sons." (Alpha 905-912)

**Resources.** All the parents in this study struggled in some way to accept their son’s gay identity. However, many participants were not aware of the resources available to parents who are struggling with their son’s identity (i.e., PFLAG). Many of these participants wished that there were more resources for parents who are going through the coming out process. One parent acknowledges a need for a support system for parents, especially in rural areas:

if there had been like a support group that was online that I could have accessed anonymously.... you know? That might have been helpful. Instead of going through that because when you're out in the sticks, like we are, when nobody talks about anything and they just whisper and gossip. That would've been nice just to have somebody that had already been through it, and lived through it, just to know, you know? To give me some pointers, you know? (Lambda 864-869)

Another participant commented on how the lack of resources for parents with gay sons created issues for him when parenting his son. He specifically cited feeling lost when attempting to have the “sex talk” with his own son: “But there were no books available
for us to say: "Hey (son) everything's in this book for you". It's not there. Nor do I believe there's a book available now, I don't know. The internet's available.” (Iota 774-776). In these situations, the lack of resources available to heterosexual parents of gay sons created barriers and concerns, making developmental milestones in parenting difficult to maneuver.

**Awareness of Son’s Experience.** Apart from the gay aspects of their son’s life, participants appear to vary on their level of awareness of the experiences that their son has had. In other words, an understanding of what has happened to their son. One mother recalled being aware of the fact that her son was using drugs:

“Mom, thanks for saving me" he said, “because I think I would've done more" and you know, he was with somebody.... his best buddy. You know? People would come to the door. Guy tried to hurt her and (son), being small, he just jumped on this guy (laughs) and I'm like: "(Son) you could've been killed" he said: "I know Mom. I did that. He left." and I'm like: "What did he do?" (laughs) But he struggled with all of that. He didn't know how we knew, but (son)'s an open book. That's all I can say. (laughs) (Xi 951-957)

Another father expressed awareness over his son’s struggle in school and the efforts that he and his wife took to help him. Part of these efforts also involved self-disclosure of the participant’s own struggle in school when he was a child:

We definitely showed him from both of our perspectives, my wife and myself--I struggled in school and just tried to use ourselves as examples, you know: "you can do anything you want to do if you put yourself to it.” (Iota 92-94)
It appears as thought awareness of gay aspects of their son’s life is a smaller piece of a larger whole for parents. Participants appear to be actively involved in their son’s life and, as a result, are aware of a multitude of experiences that their son had or is currently experiencing, not simply those experiences related to their son being gay.

**Sharing Learned Knowledge.** One unique aspect of this category was the tendency of participants to espouse knowledge that they had learned as part of going through the coming out process. This knowledge also came freely, without being evoked by the researcher and frequently showed up while the participant was answering other questions. The participants appear to be speaking to other parents with gay sons when they offered out their learned knowledge. One mother commented on the behavior of parents who have rejected their gay sons:

> Oh, well they're stupid. Sorry but if you don't.... if you rejected your son or daughter because of their sexuality or whatever--and you don't own that....? and you have a problem with them or having their friends over? Like don't bother me, (son) can bring anybody over. I don't care what they are (Zeta 618-625)

Other participants also provided their own advice and thoughts on the coming out process for other parents. One mother utilized a metaphor to help other parents understand what it was like going through the coming out process with her son:

> I mean I know there was an adjustment period. You know just getting used to it and....but you know, after that when we jumped right in....that was it. It was like all or nothing jumping in. Once we jumped in it's like taking, as a parent, taking that first.... jump off the diving board I guess. (Gamma 842-845)
It appears as though a key trait of parents that have moved towards acceptance is the willingness to share their experience with others and help educate parents that are struggling with their son’s gay identity.

Knowledge of gay related issues and experiences appears to help facilitate the acceptance process. Whereas a lack of knowledge, or incorrect knowledge appears to impede the march towards acceptance. In addition, the participant’s level of awareness in regard to gay-related issues, as well as the amount of resources available to them, either facilitated growth and acceptance or created a sense of frustration and confusion. This level of awareness was critical and was not just related to their son’s gay identity, but to their son’s personality as a whole. The more knowledge that parents had, the more clarity they gained about their son’s experience. This knowledge appears to facilitate acceptance. Once parents gained an understanding of the issues that their son faced, they were comfortable and willing to discuss their experiences with others.

**Loss of Heterosexual Fantasy**

The coming out process is arduous for parents in many ways. This is due to several experiences that parents have once their son comes out. First, parents must contend with the mixture of emotions they feel when their son initially tells them that they are gay. Second, most of the parents in this study admitted that they lacked knowledge of gay men and their experiences. However, apart from the emotions experienced by parents, and the lack of knowledge these parents had at their disposal, was also an unexpected grieving period. These participants had visions of what their son’s life would look like when they grew up. These visions did not involve a gay identity. Therefore, when their son came out, there was a shattering of expectations as well as grief over the loss of a future they
HETEROSEXUAL PARENTS THAT MOVE TOWARD ACCEPTANCE

had come to expect. These parents lost the fantasy of their son being a heterosexual individual and had to adjust to that loss. There are several properties that make-up the loss of heterosexual fantasy: *Marriage, Grandchildren, Carrying on Last Name,* and *Son’s Aspirations.*

**Marriage.** Participants in this study voiced grief and sadness over the belief that their son would never get married. This belief is inaccurate as their gay son does have the option to get married if they so choose (at least in the USA). The source of this inaccurate belief appears to be stereotypes and/or a lack of knowledge. One mother recalled confronting her beliefs regarding the stability of gay marriages:

> like "oh you know people in the LGBTQ they don't have relationships that last. They're going to get a divorce. It's not going to be stable." and then I started thinking about it like "oh well because heterosexual marriages are so stable" (Alpha 69-71)

Another participant reflected on when her son initially came out and she had written a letter detailing the reasons why she rejected him. She feels guilt over writing the letter now but acknowledges that her son getting married was one of the expectations she had for his future: “Oh I wrote him a five-page letter, sent it to him: "I gave birth to a son to get married and give me grandkids not to”....blah blah blah blah. Five pages of just....I regret that” (Zeta 350-352). Fear that the participant may not get to see their son get married due to their gay identity appears to fuel feelings of anger and grief.

**Grandchildren.** Another major loss for parents was the belief that their son would never have children because of their gay identity. This inaccurate belief stems from the fact that two men cannot physically reproduce a child. However, this belief does not
acknowledge that there are other ways in which two men can become fathers together (e.g., adoption, surrogacy). This belief appears to cause discord during the initial coming out process. Many parents felt as though they had been robbed of an identity that they had anticipated (i.e. being grandparents). One father described how even though he had a grandson from another son, he still wanted to have more: “I guess there's other things, but like.... I mean since then my daughter has had a son, but you know, we all want grandkids” (Eta 61-63). Another father also lamented not having grandchildren, he cited spiritual and religious reasons for wanting his son to procreate:

It's just like.... we don't have any grandkids. My other son is married and it's like:

"Maybe (son) could produce grandkids?" You know? Something that--and I believe that's what God created us for, for life. To bring life into the world--that's how you got here. (Nu 69-72)

Grandchildren appear to be one of the biggest losses for parents, especially if they had no other son that would be able to give them grandkids.

**Carrying on Last Name.** One loss that was specific to fathers was the loss of their name being passed down through their son. There appears to be a sense of sadness that they themselves would not be remembered. This was not a loss that this researcher had anticipated witnessing upon beginning this study. However, fear and sadness regarding this loss showed up consistently throughout the research. One father discusses how his son is essentially the only hope he has for passing on the family name:

Certainly, I would be wrong if I didn't say I felt disappointment....and--Oh! I know why I was telling you this about the family! The disappointing thing, as my wife mentioned, is that.... you know....there was only one....I only had one brother in my
siblings. He has had two girls.....and I had one boy, and my other sisters each had one girl. There was no one in our family line to carry on the name. (Delta 119-123) For one father, the loss of the family name was his first thought upon hearing that his son was gay:

Anyway, I was just totally shocked, and you know, a lot of things run through your head like.... well....what about my family name? Where does it go from here? And honestly that was my first thought was that he'll never marry, and I won't have grandkids named (family last name). (Epsilon 8-11)

Another father acknowledges his sadness over his last name not being passed on and even stated that he would be ok with his son and his son’s husband adopting a child:

you know as far as (son)--and I still think he'd make a good dad, if they would adopt one, but you know, even the daughter having one....he doesn't have my last name. You know? That's not uncommon either, but I just kind of always hoped (son) would have a son, carry on my name, you know, our name, and I guess that came to a—it’s not going to happen. (Eta 63-67).

For these fathers it appears as though their legacy being threatened is a difficult hurdle to overcome. The loss of the legacy is traumatic for them as they believed having a son would ensure their name would pass on. While it is still possible for their gay sons to pass on the family name, it appears as though even the thought of not having their name pass on created intense feelings of grief.

Career Expectations for their Son. Parents also discuss fear that their son’s gay identity would bar them from achieving success. That a heterosexual orientation would allow them to progress further in society than a gay identity. One father discusses his
son’s career aspirations and how he initially worried that his son would experience barriers to success:

beginning even in young high school days, he was preaching himself and in our--Southern Baptist is what I am--and, in our denomination, you know, we don't ordain homosexuals and....I'm not even saying--well I think there was a time that was his plan too. (Eta 32-35).

He recognizes the barriers that his son would face if he had wanted to go into the priesthood. He expressed a sense of sadness over his son potentially not being able to become a pastor if that was the career path that he chose. The participant stated that he was later able to move past this fear and concern. However, this did not occur until after he said something to his son that he later regretted. In this instance, his son had expressed interest in becoming a teacher:

there was a time that he wanted to be a teacher and then he went on to be a lawyer, and that's probably a good thing too but.... I think I even told him. I said--I think I even told him this and I am sorry now, and I think I've told him that, but I think I told him, you know: "There's no school ever going to hire you." You know? “They wouldn't want you around kids” and I know that hurt him and I....know that isn't even the truth now because there are gay teachers and, in fact, I told him, I said: "If I was on the school board, I wouldn't hire you." and I love him dearly! But I wouldn't of--at that time anyway I wouldn't of hired--you know that's been.... oh gosh, probably 20 years ago. I can't remember exactly. I think it was right at his high school senior year. So, I've learned a lot since then too, but if I....you know,
and I think that hurt him and it hurt me and didn't help our relationship any, at that time. (Eta 69-79)

In this example, the participant expresses regret over what he said to his son and even confessed that he was wrong, gay men can be good teachers. He also acknowledges how this comment hurt their relationship. The belief that their son’s identity as a gay man will create barriers to career opportunities, makes it difficult for parents to move towards acceptance. This is because being gay is then viewed as a detriment and a disadvantage.

The loss of heterosexual fantasy phenomenon appears to exist due to the emotions of hope and fear. Participants in this study had hopes for their son that appear to begin at conception. These parents had a collection of dreams and expectations that their son would live a heterosexual life. This involved getting married, having children, and passing on the family name. In addition, these fathers had career aspirations that they believed were now thrown into peril due to their son’s identity. They believed that this identity would make them an outcast and would bar them from employment. In addition, especially for fathers, their son identifying as a gay man appears to trigger fear of their own mortality. They had hoped for a son that would provide them with grandchildren, effectively passing on their last name. When their son identified as a gay man, their fear that they themselves would be forgotten intensified.

Self-Work

One important aspect of the parent’s journey towards acceptance was self-improvement or self-work. These participants acknowledge the need to change the way they thought about gay men. For each participant, the self-work journey was unique. However, there are common behaviors that appear as parents move through the process.
Many parents discuss the need to gain more knowledge about what it means to be gay. In addition, they are driven to understand their son’s experience. In many situations this meant finding resources, doing research, or talking to experts or respected authority figures who were well versed in knowledge regarding sexual identities. Other parents need to focus more on “soul-searching” or examining their own beliefs and why they had such strong reactions to their son’s gay identity. Many participants also acknowledge the need for self-care. The process of coming to accept their son was difficult and involved a level of emotional work. These participants were patient and kind to themselves throughout the process. In many situations, they acknowledge that they need to take a break from the emotional turmoil involved with changing the way they view their son.

The properties involved in this category are self-education, reaching out for support, self-awareness, and self-care.

**Self-education.** Many of the participants in this study acknowledge their lack of education on the subject of sexual identity and took action to remedy this situation. One mother recognizes that she did not know anything as her son was the first person that ever came out to her. She discusses conducting research through the use of books to help her grow in understanding. Initially, she began her research with more religious texts, but expressed skepticism over the information presented: “I read a book about, I think Erma Bombeck, or Barbara Johnson or something or someone had a gay son, and of course her gay son went through conversion therapy and got married and lived happily ever after” (Lambda 702-704). She eventually decided to explore literature outside of a religious context and discusses her journey as she waded through the new information that was presented to her:
Then I started reading the other side of the story on my own research instead of just everything that came out of the Southern Baptist mouth....and you know, stuff that it could be genetics. I know (son) sent me something one time that the 2nd sons a lot of times are the gay ones and I thought: "Well that's not right because I had a miscarriage before (son)" Then I thought: "Well that would make him the 2nd son" you know? (Lambda 708-713)

For other participants, the growth in understanding was evident from the way in which they discuss sexual identity, they acknowledge that they simply did not understand the sheer complexity involved with sexual orientation. One father reflected on his growth in this knowledge:

whether or not you’re looking for a complete sexual change because you can't identify with the body that you were born with.... that to me represents all those points on that lineal line of sexuality. I think the common assumption unfortunately is always that well....99.9% of all these are in the same category of heterosexual, and there's not much deviation left or right on that, which I've come to understand now, and accept across the board. Now it's huge! It's huge! You know, there's bisexual people and some that--I don’t question it! (Iota 787-793)

Participants who sought out education appear to move closer to acceptance by virtue of coming to understand something they had no knowledge of. This knowledge helped them view gay identities as an integral part of the human experience.

**Reaching out for Support.** Many participants also choose to seek out information through experts or individuals that they respected and knew were knowledgeable. One parent discusses how she initially took her son to a Christian Psychologist with the hope
of “fixing” him but was dismayed when the psychologist gave her bad news. The psychologist’s statement that her son cannot be changed led her to explore different forms of research apart from religious texts:

   it kind of charred me when we took him to a....I think it was probably a psychologist, a Christian Psychologist for counseling and he said: "you know, I can just save you money, you're not going to change him." You know? Which is just exactly what (son) wanted to hear, but we're like: "Well boy, this guy has really let us down" and then I started reading the other side of the story on my own research instead of just everything that came out of the Southern Baptist mouth.... (Lambda 704-710)

Another participant discusses how, as he became more accepting of his son’s sexual identity, he met more people that identified as gay men. He eventually met a gay individual who was a well-respected doctor and was not only able to provide the participant with insight and information on what it means to identity as a gay man, but was able to help his son come to terms with his identity as well:

   he did have somebody he kept referring to who I've gotten to know now better named (mentor's name) who's a physician, a pediatrician for (hospital). I think (mentor) is getting close to retirement now--if he hasn't already retired. But (mentor) is an interesting guy. And I think that's where (son) got a lot of his support--at least initially, was through the people in the chorus....and (mentor) was particularly helpful, because he's a physician, and (mentor) kept telling him: "This is not abnormal. This is a natural thing." You know, "You don't have a choice, this is something that you were--was bound to happen" (Eta 780-795)
Self-awareness. Growing to understand their own biases and beliefs was a major part of the acceptance process for participants. Parents expressed a sense of humility as they acknowledge how their opinions on gay men interfered in their relationship with their son. One mother reflected on how her focus on what others would think of her prevented her from considering how others would react to her son:

Researcher: What was the hardest part about (son) being gay? Like if you could sum that up what was the hardest part?

Participant: (scoffs) selfishness. Me, and what people would think about me. That's selfishness. "What are people going to think about me?" (Zeta 123-138)

This mother was open about how her beliefs and thought process prevented her from empathizing with her son. She then expressed regret over her behavior. Another participant also recognizes that she needed to change her perspective regarding her son. This participant was not as focused on what others thought, but instead needed to come to the realization that her son was still the same person: “So never even gave it a thought so I just had to have time to.... go through it to let it sink in and just realize you know; he hasn't changed a bit you know? It's me that had to change.” (Beta 54-63).

Many participants not only acknowledge the need to change their mindset, but were also able to re-frame the experience as an opportunity for self-growth. One father commented on how all of his kids have helped him better understand the world around him and the biases he held:

All the basic stereotypes you have. As I look back and I think about it, I know I was that male chauvinist. Hate the cheerleaders, hate the dance teams--I was a coach. I was this, I was that--and then my daughter became one. It was the greatest thing
that ever happened to her and to our family. Just things that you know she has accomplished through it, and you know really, it's the same thing with this. You know, I had my preconceived ideas and....it’s just, the bottom line is you look back and you think to yourself: "who is (son)?" (Epsilon 18-28)

The participants in this study expressed an openness to exploring their own thoughts and preconceived notions they had regarding gay men. In addition, they were willing to make corrections in their behavior and had the humility to admit that they were wrong. One participant even apologized to their son for not being accepting during the coming out process. This participant apologized not just because she felt that it was the right thing to do, but because she believed that her son needed to hear it:

   So, I told her, "you just have to ask for their forgiveness because, you know, in some way we failed them that they couldn't come talk to us." So, that's how I felt. I just went to (son) and I apologized. Of course, he's like: "Mom, you don't have to apologize" and I said: "Yes I do. I feel like I wasn't there for you, and that you couldn't talk to me." So, that helped us a lot. (Xi 270-274)

**Self-Care.** Participants frequently discuss the stress of going through the coming out process and the emotions that they felt. One of the most prominent experiences they had to deal with was being judged by others. One mother discusses a supportive Church friend that helped her realize that the people who actually care do not cast judgment. This mother utilized this friend as a support system for her and her son. In addition, she reminded herself during times of stress that the people who actually care do not judge:

   Participant: She's so good with the youth. She always comes up to every one of them and hugs them and asks how stuff is going. You know, "Is everything going
well for you? Or? Are you struggling with something?" and they talk to her. Yeah.
So it was easy for me to talk to her too because, you know, she knew what was
going on. She didn't judge. Yeah.
Researcher: That makes all the difference. Especially when like you know that
there's somebody that legitimately just cares about what's going on with you and
just wants to know.
Participant: Yeah. Yeah. Doesn't give it a second thought. Their first thought is to
love you. Try to help you. Yeah. (Xi 1005-1020)
Other participants that experienced judgment handled the experience in different ways,
such as one mother who drew boundaries around those individuals who would lie to her
or cast judgment on her or her family, whether that be because of her son’s gay identity
or any other reason:
Participant: I can't stand a liar and I will shut you out of my life that fast. I’d just
turn you off. Unfortunately, I have that ability to say: "I'm done" and I'm done.
Don't ever call me again, don't try to contact me, don't--I'm done
Researcher: It's definitely a skill that I don't like to use but--
Participant: I've used it. I've had to use it, because I had to do it to get certain
people away from me. Not good people to have around me. (Zeta 1519-1530)
The key component of the self-work category is the concept of “drive”. All of the
properties within this sub-category involved some level of work or action. In order to
become knowledgeable or educated on sexual identities, the participant had to actively
seek out that knowledge. If the participant wanted to speak with an expert in the field or
someone that studied sexual identities, they had to reach out and find those people. These
first two properties are external and involve engagement with the outside world. However, the second two properties are more internal and involved a level of self-reflection. The participant had to become self-aware of the biases they held. This work involved looking at, and confronting, their own thought process and behavior. Self-care is also similar in nature. The participants need to be able to acknowledge when they were unable to process anymore information related to their son’s sexual identity. They need to be able to identify when a break from processing was necessary. The work that occurred in this sub-category was tangible and involved dedication and action.

*Parent Past*

The past experiences of the participants also appears to shape how they reacted to their son being a gay. The way the participant experienced growing up, the values that their family espoused, and their family’s interaction with gay persons, all had a significant impact on how they responded to and dealt with their son’s gay identity. The following property comprises the parent past sub-category: *interaction with gay individuals*

**Experience with Gay Individuals.** The level of contact with gay people varied across participants. One mother even admitted that her son was the first gay person she had ever met: “So....(son) was the first person that ever told me that, and you know, we were taught that gay people were wicked” (Lambda 176-177). Experiences such as these made it difficult for some parents to conceptualize what it means to be gay, simply by virtue of having no frame of reference. However, other parents were able to provide more extensive knowledge of their experiences with gay people before their own son came out.
One participant discusses how his own father had a gay friend when he was growing up and he had frequent contact with this man:

> I do recall a friend of my parents, a male friend of my parents. That he was definitely gay, but was very well accepted by both my mom and my dad. He was welcomed into our circle--family circle, many, many times. Interesting young man, very much artistic like. Interestingly, my dad actually met him through Alcoholics Anonymous. (Iota 140-145)

However, not all experiences with the gay community were positive. One participant discusses how her interaction with gay men tainted her impression of the community and affected her ability to come to a place of acceptance. She recalled how her husband had written an article for a church magazine. A gay member of their congregation read the article and began calling and harassing her family for what her husband had written. These messages included threats against her family:

> ...(husband) had written an article back when the kids were little, before he went to seminary. They were like 2nd and 5th grade, and before we went to seminary he was preaching in a little country church and somebody had written an article in a Presbyterian magazine and he put a big thing in there, you know, like stomped in hell with a water pistol and, you know, "Well gays are wrong and they're going to have to get their act together or they're going to Hell" and all this stuff and then we found out that one of the boys in our church was gay, and his partner or something got (husband)'s number and was calling us and harassing us. That was....a lot of the context that we had of a gay person. Somebody from the dark, shady side and they, you know....calling and harassing us and--"I know where you live, and I know
where your kids are", you know. Bizarre stuff. So....so.....our thoughts are in bizzarro world, not in the real world. (Lambda 178-193)

The participant admits that the experience was “bizzarro” and recognizes that this in combination with the religious beliefs she grew up with (i.e. “we were taught that gay people were wicked” (Lambda 177) created her frame of reference. These experiences made it more difficult to be accepting when her son came out.

The cultural context that gay men live within was also another component of gay identity that participants in this study had to address. This involves more than simply knowing someone who is gay, but actually being aware of cultural events, or having involvement with gay establishments (e.g., gay bars). Parents discuss a range of experience with gay culture, with the majority of the participants not having contact with, or knowledge of, important aspects of gay life. One parent acknowledges her lack of experience with the gay community and how her first experiences were through her son. She acknowledges that initially she was uncomfortable with public displays of affection but that after becoming more involved with gay community events, she became more comfortable:

I don't want to see kissing in front of me. I don't want see that kind of stuff but, whatever you do....is fine, and that's how I started gradually.... becoming more ok with it, and then (son) and (son's partner) would have, during the summertime, a deck--"the big deck" party, and so we would go and....lot of gay people there. (Zeta 187-201)
Another parent commented on attending the PRIDE festival with her son. She did find the whole event overwhelming, however, upon reflecting on her experience she recognizes the real reason why she was overwhelmed:

you know I went down to pride stuff with (Son).... I love his friends....it's overwhelming because people are so comfortable in their skin. I guess is a good way to put it. You know, and it's a chance for--it's their day and you know.... their pride in who they are! (Gamma 267-279)

When participants had contact with the gay community, they were forced to face their preconceived notions and frequently found that their original thoughts were inaccurate. It appears as though seeing real people helped dispel false notions about the gay community, and helped participants better understand the lives they live, enhancing their level of acceptance.

The participants’ past history with gay individuals appears to color their experience and influenced their acceptance of their gay son. The first component appears to be whether or not the interactions were negative or positive. If participants were able to interact with gay men and had early exposure that was positive (such as participant Iota), then they appear to have an easier time with acceptance. However, if the participant had a negative experience with gay men, then it appears as though stereotypes about who gay men were became reinforced (as was the case for participant Lambda). Having positive interactions with gay men was crucial to fostering acceptance. In addition, the parents’ view of gay culture also appears to influence the occurrence of acceptance. When these participants experienced gay events, they initially felt overwhelmed by the cultural plunge they experienced. However, these participants soon realized that their
preconceived notions about gay men (i.e. stereotypes) were unfounded. In addition, they were able to recognize that these cultural events fostered a sense of pride for these men. The parents in this study were able to honor these experiences and understood how they are an important part of their child maintaining their identity as a gay man.

*Parent Present.*

The experiences that the participant had in their adult life also appears to influence the acceptance process. Throughout the study, participants mentioned experiences that either helped them move closer to acceptance or hindered the process. The following properties detail these experiences: *current political beliefs, coming out complications, relationship to son’s partner,* and *relationship to son’s friends.*

**Current Political Beliefs.** Political beliefs played a role in the acceptance process. One participant discusses how his support of Donald J. Trump created a barrier between him and his son who identifies as liberal:

> The politics, the politics is rough, especially now. Especially with my other son (son's brother) you know? (Son's brother) is Trump, you know? And I am too, you know, I mean....I don't like his approach, but I think we have some other bad things out there that need to be addressed. So we don't bring that up, you know? (Nu 309-312)

The participant and his son have decided to avoid political discussions because they cannot come to agreement. They both choose to not discuss political ideology so that they can maintain a relationship. Another participant discusses how she is politically aligned with her son and that this experience leads to enhanced conversation and closeness in their relationship: “Politically, we agree 100% and go-back-and-forth and get each other
into a frenzy (laughs). So in that manner we're very close.” (Kappa 225-226). It appears as though political discord can act as a barrier to the acceptance process by way of impeding the relationship in general. However, political alignment can enhance the level of closeness the participant experiences with their son.

**Coming Out Complications.** Some participants in this study cited experiences that hindered the coming out process but were not related to their son’s gay identity, or the relationship between the participant and their son. These outside factors increased stress and made it more difficult for parents to move towards acceptance. One mother discusses how she found out her son was gay at the same time she found out he was being exploited by his drama teacher:

so he had a drama teacher who----I'd always wondered about the relationship because he was a little too close to my son, like texting him, and calling him, and like Facebooking him. Like it was ridiculous. So, when my son came out he was super angry and the way he said it was super angry like he was just like: "mom I'm a flaming homo" (laughter) and my teacher….and so I kind of got hit by a lot of sides with it, you know? So, you know I don't want my son victimized. I don’t want teachers you know--so much of that was part of that process for me (Alpha 41-52)

Another participant discusses how his mental health difficulties reduced his capacity to process his son’s gay identity. Again, issues outside of the relationship between parent and son created problems with the acceptance process:

Just get over it and move on. Well....it's not that easy, and like I said I've had....depression since then, maybe always had a little bit of it, but I was never really diagnosed with it until after that. I'm not saying that this caused it, but it certainly
didn't help it any, you know? Anyway, I think I'm doing good now and I still take Citalopram. I take one every day and I --maybe a placebo, but long as I think it's helping me (laughs) (Eta 795-800)

Coming out complications served to impede the acceptance process by overburdening participants and limiting their capacity to process their emotions and come to terms with their son’s gay identity. Eventually, these parents were able to come to a place of acceptance. However, they had additional issues they had to work through compared to other parents.

**Relationship to Important People in Son’s Life.** The relationship that the parents in this study had with important people in their son’s life either facilitated or hindered the repair of the relationship between parent and child. In the examples below, parents discuss how discord within these relationships caused strain and discord in the relationship with their son. However, some parents also experienced growth in their relationship as they were able to see that their son was being cared for by these important people, creating a sense of safety and security for these parents.

**Relationship to Significant Other.** The quality of the relationship between the participant and their son’s significant other also either enhanced or interfered with the acceptance process. When the relationship was positive, participants appear to be more engaged in their son’s life and had an easier time incorporating their partner into the family. However, when the relationship was negative, it created distance between parent and child. One mother discusses how her husband was so upset with their son’s partner he asked him to leave their home:
you know, and....oh we got into it with (son's partner) and he came to apologize....and it turned out to be a disaster and (husband) threw him out of the house, and said: "get out of my house" (Gamma 1028-1031)

On the other end of the spectrum, when the relationship with their son’s significant other was good, parents fully engaged in the relationship. One mother recalls giving a speech at her son’s wedding. She was able to incorporate humor as she discusses how her son and her son’s partner both have the same name:

So I said: "I'll get up and talk" you know? and so I said how--cause everybody always says: "how do you tell them apart? They're both named (son and husband's name), blah, blah, blah". So that's when I said: "well the way I tell them apart, there's my (son) and then there's my favorite (son’s partner)". (Kappa 136-139)

The quality of the relationship with the son’s significant other appears to dictate how close participants were willing to get to the couple dynamic. Some parents felt comfortable enough giving speeches at their son’s wedding, while other parents were not comfortable sharing the same space as their son’s partner.

**Relationship to Son’s Friends.** Similar to the dynamic between the participant and their son’s partner, the quality of the relationship with their son’s gay friends determined how close parents were willing to get to them. One father discusses how in the past he did not like his son’s friends and was frustrated with his son for not having a better vetting process:

He would befriend people and I tell you this was the thing when he came out is--he would befriend everybody, and he wouldn't look into the character of these people, and he was bringing people into my house....I mean one kid stole a couple hundred
bucks from us and a friend...who was there swimming! And he just wouldn't believe it was this individual! Well later on this individual stole from him. (Epsilon 112-116)

This experience led the participant to be wary of his son’s friends and also led him to question his son’s judge of character, making it more difficult for him to engage with his son’s gay identity.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, when the son’s friends were “good people” parents were more willing to engage. At times this even led to increased empathy for the shared trauma narrative that many gay men have:

Like....we've gone over there and helped him throw parties. I mean just (inaudible), and that helped us get to know his friends....and I think part of it is just to understand a little bit more about.... the difficulties that--that those men have in their lives. To feel part of it and I feel very sorry for the parents who don't take advantage of that opportunity. (Delta 160-175)

When the son had good people in their life, it provided the opportunity for parents to meet their friends and become more aware of the experiences of gay individuals. This engagement helped humanize the gay community for participants.

The current level of acceptance expressed by participants appears to be influenced the day-to-day interactions that parents had with their son. If the parents shared political beliefs that were similar to what their son believed, then the family appears to experience a higher level of connection and moved more quickly towards acceptance. However, if there was political discord, then parent and child encountered an obstacle. In some cases, this obstacle was so intense that some parents choose to simply not discuss politics
with their children. In addition, the other happenings in the participants’ lives also appears to influence acceptance. In the case of this study, parents struggling with mental health issues appear to have a harder time coming to acceptance. In addition, if there were other negative events that occurred at approximately the same time as their son’s coming out experience (e.g., discovering that their son is being abused), parents were likely to be overwhelmed and have a diminished capacity to process their own feelings. Lastly, the relationships that their son has within the gay community also had an impact on the currently level of acceptance expressed by parents. If parent’s had good relationships with their son’s significant other and/or their son’s gay friends, then acceptance appears to be more likely. When relationships with these people were good, parents were more willing to empathize with the lived experience of the gay men who were involved in their son’s life.

**Category 3: Son’s Journey**

A major theme identified within this study was the son’s journey towards becoming a gay man. This journey involved the coming out process, the reactions of others to the son’s coming out process, how well the son adapted to being gay, and personality characteristics that influenced their experience as a gay man. Participants frequently commented on their son’s experience and reactions to their own gay identity. The participants also discusses the support systems their son had (or didn’t have) as well as their son’s level of engagement with the family as they came to terms with their identity. The following sub-categories have been identified for this category: *Son’s Identity,* and *Son’s Experience.* Category 3 is represented in Table 3.4.

*Table 3.4*

*Son’s Journey*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subcategory</th>
<th>Property</th>
<th>Dimension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Son’s Identity</td>
<td>a. Compassion</td>
<td>(absent to present)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Level of Assertiveness</td>
<td>(low to high)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. Self-Acceptance</td>
<td>(absent to present)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Son’s Experience</td>
<td>a. Son’s Support System</td>
<td>(weak to strong)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Coming Out Experience</td>
<td>(difficult to easy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. Involvement with Family</td>
<td>(reclusive to engaged)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d. Shielding</td>
<td>(absent to present)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e. Mental Health Difficulties</td>
<td>(absent to present)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f. Relationship with Siblings</td>
<td>(negative to positive)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Son’s Identity

Who their son is as a person had an impact on how they handled their coming out process. The level of outgoingness and confidence that these men had, influenced how they came to terms with their identity. In addition, their level of comfort with being gay also influenced how they moved through the coming out process. The son’s level of comfort was especially important when they engaged with participants who were struggling to understand and adapt to their son’s gay identity. The following properties form the Son’s Identity sub-category: compassion, assertiveness, and self-acceptance.

Compassion. The son’s level of compassion for the participant played a major role in helping participants come to terms with their son’s gay identity. Participants frequently made mistakes or said the “wrong” thing when coming to terms with their son’s sexual identity. When the son was understanding of their parent’s process, parents were appreciative and had more space to work through their feelings, subsequently leading them towards acceptance. One mother expressed appreciation for her son’s patience:

Researcher: is there anything that happened along the way that made this whole process easier for you? Any kind of belief? Anything that maybe (son) did?
Participant: I was just going to say it's probably more that um, (son) didn't get upset with me. You know? He kind of--at least I don't remember him doing that. That's not a memory I have at all. He just kind of--as long as it took me (laughs) you know? Kind of let me process things and let me go through it. That was huge! you know? (Beta 515-525).

Another participant discusses how proud and shocked she was when her son expressed compassion for her homophobic mother, even after she offered to cut her mother out of their life so that he would not have to deal with the homophobia:

I'm not doing this, like I will cut my mother (laughs) out and I will be with my son and I gave him a choice. I was like: "listen if you want me to....do this and take this stand...." and he was so compassionate he was like: "I don't....I don't want you to do that". He goes: "Grandma is who she is. She's old, she's not going to live here long. I don't want her gone from the family. I get that she doesn't like anybody who isn't just like her....and I'm willing to accept that." So, I mean he was pretty compassionate and accepting (Alpha 330-336).

**Assertiveness.** The son’s level of confidence in themselves and their ability to filter out the opinions of others, also appears to influence the coming out process for participants. Assertiveness communicated to participants that their son knew what they were doing and that they were confident in their own skin. This appears to make it easier for parents to come to terms with their son’s gay identity. One mother commented on how her son knew that he was gay when he was a child: “No. That's about all he said that night, you know? and he told us that he felt like that when he was young, you know? When he was a teenager or whatever.” (Mu 357-362). She then stated that in addition to
this, her son showed no signs of internally wrestling with his gay identity. For this parent, seeing her son thriving in his identity facilitated her own journey towards acceptance. She was able to understand that even though she did not initially agree with his sexual identity, it is his life to live and his identity as a gay man is simply part of who he is as a person.

In some cases, their son displayed bold behavior that the participant was proud of, even if the boldness stemmed from their gay identity. One mother shared how she experienced this with her son who was studying to become a lawyer. Her son confronted their church when they attempted to fire his father who was the pastor. The church congregation was attempting to fire the pastor because of his son’s gay identity:

Our savior in that was (son). Who had more sense than all of our stupid Church members and came with his little book of "Robert's Rules of Orders" and came home from college to be at that business meeting and he called all these people that hadn't been to Church that said they were good friends forever and ever, and rallied the support and we were not fired (Lambda 244-249)

One mother with a military background discusses how shocked she was at her son’s boldness when he chose to bring drag clothes with him to the Middle East and dress in drag while attending a military ball:

and I asked like: "what did your commander say?" and they're like: "I don't care. It was a non-issue". My second son was learning a Middle-Eastern dialect and they would select students to go into a city that was heavily--heavily populated with that language and he brought both. and I'm like: "you're going into a middle-eastern culture.... where women are"--and he hates that, right? Like that women could be
subservient, or secondary citizens and he was like: "nope, so I packed em both, I just told them I was going to pack them both" ok. (Alpha 765-771)

When their son showed a level of boldness or was adamant about their gay identity, participants appear to move towards understanding and acceptance. For some parents, this movement towards acceptance appears to stem from the realization that their son’s identity as a gay man was incredibly important to them. This piece of their identity was so important, that they risked public ridicule and even harm in order to express that piece of themselves.

Assertiveness was also expressed by the sons in this study through involvement in social justice movements. One mother described how her son did not just advocate for gay men, but other marginalized groups as well:

I think they want to fight; they don't like the boundary or the societal norms. It's so interesting because they....like they are the type, like they would advocate for women, and like, oh my God….I don't know, feminine hygiene products like, “they should be supplied by the government. They supply condoms, they supply all this stuff.” Like, I don't know, they always have a cause, and they're always advocates of any sort of oppression or discrimination, they'll see it. Like things that I accept, like this is just part of being a woman in the world, like "whatever its ok" and they're like: "no! that's wrong! You need to have equal rights" like "no, I'm good" you know? "I'm good" (Alpha 729-736)

Another participant discusses how her son advocated for himself and others through writing in newspapers. She expressed anger for the individuals who attacked her son for
what he wrote. However, he continued to express his views even amongst the hateful responses he received from the community:

I think he was wide open with it, because he was publishing things, he was working on the newspaper at (university) and he would write columns about being gay or reference that in his columns. From whence we got other people that are still on the “asshole list” up at (county) telling him, you know: "this is an abomination before God" and all that and "If you try to preach in any church ever, we will show up and--" you know? "Make sure you don't do it" and you know, which--that's totally not acceptable. I think pretty much all the people that he's around now, he feels comfortable with and he doesn't hold back or make any pretenses. (Lambda 579-587)

**Self-Acceptance.** How comfortable their son was with their sexual identity also appears to influence how parents responded to the knowledge that their son is gay. When their son was more confident in who they are, participants appear to move closer to acceptance. One mother discusses how her son initially struggled with the thoughts of others but is now confident in who he is:

basically he went from crying to….he was dreading what was coming. The reactions of others. Now he doesn’t care what people think. He’s morphed into that “I am who I am, and if you don’t like it--too bad”. (son) has always been a warrior. (Pi 92-95)

In contrast, witnessing the son struggle to accept themselves and be in pain, also motivated some participants to express compassion and provide support, such as one mother who witnessed her son battle with his own identity:
So....it was kind of hard because he struggled. He didn't really want to be gay. We had gone to Church and we were driving home.... I’m going to cry. We were driving along, and he said: "Mom, I don't want to be gay" and he just started crying. I just told him: "it would be alright" and I did tell him that if I could take it away for him.... I would! I think that's where the bonding started, was right there. (Xi 24-32)

In the above example, witnessing her son in pain appears to be more devastating than his gay identity. Her immediate response was to then provide care and support.

In this section, movement towards acceptance appears to be influenced by their son’s level of stability. If there son is confident in their identity as a gay man and willing to assert themselves and their identity, parents appear to be more willing to move towards acceptance. This appears to be due to the parents witnessing their son thriving in who they are as a person. In addition, when the son was stable they were better able to manage their own emotions. This led to increased compassion and understanding for their parents.

The sons in this study were patient and were willing to give their parents time to adjust. For several parents, this time and space allowed them to come to a place of acceptance.

Interestingly, even when their son struggled with their identity as a gay man, these parents were able to acknowledge that their son was going through real pain. Instead of attempting to change their son’s identity, these parents focused on the emotional pain that their son was going through. These parents appear to react instinctually, focusing on their son’s well-being as opposed to their own thoughts and feelings regarding their son’s sexual identity.

Son’s Experience
The events that occurred in the life of their son were the counterpart to how their son experienced their identity. Together, identity and experience helped shape an understanding of their son’s current mental health and well-being as a gay man. The experience sub-category details how others reacted to their son’s gay identity, the son’s interactions with their family, the level of support they experienced from others, and their own mental processing and stability. The following constitute the son’s experience sub-category: support system, coming out experience, involvement with family, shielding, mental health, and relationship with siblings.

**Support system.** The son’s level of support as they moved through the coming out process was frequently cited by parents as being crucial to their son coming to accept themselves. Participants appear to be grateful when their son has a group of people that they can rely on. While many participants gradually became open to discussing gay issues with their son, they also stated that the son’s support system was helpful because there are gay experiences that the participants cannot relate to and, therefore, they were unable to help their son process those experiences. When their son had other people to talk to, parents felt that their child was able to get the support that they need. One mother commented on this experience: “He has a few friends that he is always relying on, but he knows that he can discuss anything with me, and he does.” (Omicron 134-135). This participant was also able to witness the way in which the gay community embraced her son. She remembers discovering how popular and well loved her son was in the community:

(son) took me out to gay bars and called me up to the center of the room because he was manager of this bar. Everyone in the audience thanked me for supporting my
son. This happened in at least 3 different settings. Everyone loved (son) and he was always greeted as a celebrity when we were out. (Omicron 65-68)

Another participant commented on how seeing her son with a solid group of friends was not only a point of pride for her, but it also helped to assuage her fears that her son’s gay identity would leave him isolated. Witnessing her son interact with healthy and supportive friends also helped her move to a place of acceptance:

Researcher: Basically, anything at all that really helped--that made the transition process, the acceptance process easier. Something that actually stands out to me that you said before was the fact that you like (son's husband) so much

Participant: Yes! and some of the friends, or most of his friends that we've met, have just been a lot of fun! You know, they'll have a cookout in their backyard with four other couples and invite us: "Stop by and have a drink” or something You know? I've really enjoyed meeting his friends and after worrying about him as a child, and whether he would have any sort of social life or friends or whatever--to see him with such a group of really nice people....and I'm not saying that his circle even just includes gays, there's a woman that he stayed in close touch with when he worked at Avis, and she and her husband come by and every once and awhile he'll say: "Oh, I’m meeting Sue for a drink after work". So he's made a lot of good connections, good friends. (Kappa 584-597)

Son’s Coming Out Experience. How the son experienced their own coming out process also appears to have an influence on the participants in this study. Parents discuss what they witnessed as their son came to a place of self-acceptance. For one son, the participant discusses how he struggled with the coming out process, specifically, fear
regarding what others would think of him: “I don’t know. It would be hard to read….basically he went from crying to….he was dreading what was coming. The reactions of others.” (Pi 92-93). One participant discusses how her son’s struggle with the coming out process put a strain on their relationship. She stated that she had to provide more support as her son sorted through his identity:

he struggled with: "Is that really who I am?" So, then I had to work harder to show him that, you know, I did care and, you know, whatever struggles he was going through that he needed to talk to me, because I'd listen and maybe I could help him.

Yeah, we had trouble with that. (Xi 878-881)

There were also participants in this study that did not witness their son struggle with the coming out experience, even when there was some level of rejection. One mother remembers her son losing a friend when he came out, but that in general her son was met with support and acceptance:

So it's kind of, you know, I can't really remember it being rough. He hung out with 3 guys who were all motorheads in community college and the one guy was a--his father was one of the police chiefs in our town. I think the one time when he said: "I'm gay" that was like the only friend that I knew that responded with: "that's disgusting" and left him. (Kappa 380-384)

**Involvement with Family.** The level of involvement that their son had with their family appears to influence the acceptance process. When their son was more highly involved with the family, the family was more aware of what was happening to them. Knowing what was going on in their son’s life made the acceptance process easier. One father discusses how he sees his son on a regular basis. In addition, he defends his
relationship with his son, stating that he does not want it to change from what it has always been. In addition, his son being gay does not change how he feels about him:

We see him daily. I do projects with him all the time. Household projects, he comes through he does things. He used to be a regular almost every Sunday before the pandemic hit--he and his husband. We're close, and that's the one thing I had in conversation that I had with his partner's father. You might get to this point too, he and his wife were.... not so good about the relationship developing, because I think they were in difficulty in trying to accept their own son's homosexuality. That he was "different", but I told (son) from the very beginning, I said--and I told his father, you know, this man is (son’s husband)'s dad. I said: "I don't know what kind of relationship you want with your son, but I know the relationship I want with my son is not to change from what it already was. So the fact that he's gay, the fact that he's in love with your son is not even a.....it's not even on the plate for me.” (Iota 256-266)

The participant in the above example had a close relationship with his son and valued this close relationship. When their son was actively involved in family life, the participant appears to prioritize the relationship. The participant was not willing to sacrifice that relationship over their son’s gay identity. Alternatively, when their son was not involved in the family, the participant discusses a sense of sadness, wishing that their son was closer so that they can better understand his experience. One mother commented on the distance that she felt from her son:

Participant: When he left for college, apparently most of his speech team was gay and they became a family. At first, he wouldn't come home because he felt he
didn't belong. I wasn't around him during this time because he lived so far away. I eventually begged him to come home for a holiday meal and told him he had to bring a male friend, dating or not.

Researcher: So it seems like it wasn’t necessarily pain for you in terms of him being gay, but just wanting to be involved in his life and for him to know that he could come to you.

Participant: I wanted my son back!!! (Omicron 147-155)

In this example, the distance the parent felt from their son actually led them to re-prioritize their values. This participant wanted her son back in her life so badly that she was willing to embrace his gay identity so that she could see him.

**Shielding.** The phenomenon of shielding involves the participant’s son intentionally blocking the participant from aspects of their life. The reasoning behind this appears to vary from child to child. However, it appears as though many of the sons in this study did not want their parents to know about their gay identity or they were afraid of judgment from their parents. However, it is important to note that shielding did not just occur with the son’s gay identity but appears to be a practice that their son engaged in regarding other aspects of his life as well. One mother discusses how she was kept in the dark regarding her son’s experiences:

Especially with this pandemic stuff. It's been really hard on him and he don't say much. You know, he won't talk to us. He texts us, you know? And I wanted to talk to him. I don't know how many times I thought of getting in the car and going to (son’s city) just to see (slaps hands) if he was ok. You know? I wish he would communicate more (Mu 150-153)
This participant expressed frustration and concern over not knowing what is happening in her son’s life regarding the pandemic. It is possible that her son is attempting to protect her from the stress that he is currently facing. However, by not knowing what is going on with her son, this participant had an increased sense of anxiety and, as a result, strain was placed upon their relationship. This pattern also appears for another participant who believes that his son was trying to protect him from the knowledge of his gay identity.

This father commented on how this action actually caused more tension in his relationship with his son:

I think it was (wife) me or her found something on the computer that he hadn't closed. I don't know if it was an accident or if he left it there just for us, you know, I think it was an accident but anyway….so we found out in a sense he was living a lie, but I think he was doing that to protect us, but it still added to that betrayal feeling (Eta 325-329)

Mental Health. Participants also discuss their son’s mental health and well-being.

The parents in this study commented on how their son’s mental health struggles and coming out stress created extreme difficulty for their son. One father commented on his son’s state-of-mind during the coming out process:

I think he struggled a whole lot, at first. Like I said, a lot of it was even before I knew what was going on, but he went through a spell there when he was…in high school, where he was scared of--what, we didn't know. He slept on our bedroom floor for.... quite a while. Not like years, but months probably. Not every night but a lot of times. Then he has depression anyway and I think this definitely made that worse. Honestly, he probably still struggles with it, but he's got a pretty good grip
on it I think now, but I'm sure there's parts of it he doesn’t understand either. (Eta 726-733)

This father was aware that his son was going through a difficult time even though he did not know what was happening exactly. He was also conscious of the fact that his son’s depression also made his struggle more difficult. Other participants in this study experienced different forms of mental health difficulties in their son, such as one mother who commented on how her son turned to substance abuse as a coping mechanism for his struggles:

“I just need prayer that (son) can get through this" and kind of getting back to his self cause, oh my gosh, he went through alcohol. He started to do drugs and I found out and I had him move back home. (Xi 948-950)

**Relationship with Siblings.** The son’s relationship with their siblings was a common topic of discussion. The siblings in this study on average had a positive reaction to their brother’s gay identity. However, participants commented on the unique way in which their son’s siblings communicated acceptance and affection:

I mean brothers don't care. I mean brothers tease them. You know like yeah the way that they joke around each other. Like say the third boy. He'll be like: "Oh my God, you're gay" but it's so disrespectful and rude (laughter) and I'm sitting here as a mom going like: "don't say that" but that's just how they joke and it's ok. I don't know. (Alpha 577-581)

The mother in this example is shocked by the things that her straight son would say to her gay sons, but also recognize that the relationship between siblings is different from the relationship between mother and child. She acknowledges that teasing and ridicule are
how her boys showed acceptance and affection. Another participant discusses how her other son did not react to the news that their brother was gay. In fact, it appears as though siblings are typically already aware of their brother’s gay identity: “No there wasn’t a whole lot of change. (Sister) said he played barbies with me my whole life (laughs). She accepted it; she didn’t care.” (Pi 78-79). In instances where the sibling was not as accepting or comfortable, the situation appears to be temporary, and those siblings quickly came around and accepted their brother. One parent commented on how her straight son’s girlfriend helped him come around to her gay son:

   When my (straight son) brought his new girlfriend to our home, I asked her if (straight son) told her about his brother. She said, “what?” I said that he was gay. She said “my biological father left my mother for a man” and she laughed. Having (girlfriend) join our family really made a difference as (straight son) was very prejudiced against gays like my husband. (Girlfriend) changed (straight son’s) attitude and that was the Thanksgiving I told (son) to bring a male to dinner. (Omicron 162-166)

This mother also described how her straight son not only went from a place of rejection to a place of acceptance, but also how he became involved in his brother’s life:

   (Straight son) and (Girlfriend) also joined (son) and I at a gay nightclub. They both had so much fun that (straight son) said he would be back and (girlfriend) danced with a Lesbian. (Straight son) actually had a wet towel fight with the bartender. So much fun! (Omicron 174-176)

support system, coming out experience, involvement with family, shielding, mental health, and relationship with siblings
This sub-category highlighted how the participant’s son experienced coming out. When their son experienced a higher rate of support, such as from their friend group or their siblings, they appear to have a more stable experience with the coming out process. In addition, when the their son was more engaged with the family and did not engage in behaviors like shielding, parents were better able to access and understand their son’s experience. Factors such as their son’s mental health also appears to have an influence. When their son struggled with disorders such as depression and substance abuse, parents typically experienced feelings of fear and confusion. They then struggled to understand their son’s experience which inhibited their ability to connect with them, impeding acceptance.

**Category 4: External Forces**

Apart from the emotions felt by participants, and the journey that was taken by both parent and son, participants acknowledge a group of outside forces that played a role in either enhancing or impeding the acceptance process. Whereas the first three categories involved a processing of internal emotions and beliefs, the external forces category involved navigating beliefs of others, established institutions, and other factors that were out of the control of the participant and the child. The three sub-categories in the external forces category are: community, religion, and time. Category 4 is displayed in Table 3.5.

**Table 3.5**

*External Forces*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subcategory</th>
<th>Property</th>
<th>Dimension</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Community</td>
<td>a. Religious Rejection</td>
<td>(absent to present)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Community Setting</td>
<td>(rural to urban)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>c. Political Stance</td>
<td>(conservative to liberal)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>d. Workplace</td>
<td>(unaccepting to accepting)</td>
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Community

The district that both the participant and their son resided in had an influence on the experience of acceptance for participants. Participants frequently referred to the community in terms of how they would respond to their son’s gay identity. Friends, family, and workplace all created areas of support or areas of concern for the participants and their gay son. Participants also acknowledge the culture and beliefs of the community and they recognize that some areas of their life are more accepting than others. In general, participants either experienced rejection or quiet acceptance. The properties in the community category consist of: religious rejection, community setting, political stance, workplace, and community awareness

Religious Rejection. Upon analysis of the data surrounding the community subgroup, it was discovered that, apart from one instance, all of the rejection expressed by the community was based on religious beliefs. However, there were also instances of religious friends and family being accepting, making religion a complicated variable within this study. One father discusses how he confronted one of his catholic friends who made homophobic comments:
I think he had said one or two things kind of like we took the wrong way and basically let him have it with both barrels that: “hey, this is my son, this is the guy that idolized you. The young man that idolized you. You can make a choice as to which way--whatever way you want to deal with it and it's not me dealing with it. You have to either accept it or don't accept it. But nothing about him has changed. He is the same person. It's just that he may love differently than you know how to love.” (Iota 612-618)

One mother also discusses a difficult experience in which a catholic neighborhood couple rejected her son. She discusses how this rejection of her son caused a rift in their relationship:

we'd camp together and....they started questioning (son) like: "well when are we going to meet any girls?"--or whatever, "that you're dating?" Then at one point, (friend’s husband)....had said: "(son) are you a faggot?" and (son) was really offended with that—and I went to his wife (friend’s wife) and said: "you know, yes, (son) is gay", and her response was: "well, I don't agree with that lifestyle choice" and so it kind of caused some friction. (Kappa 87-97)

Many parents also acknowledge that their friends more or less did not react to the news that their son was gay. One father discusses how his catholic friends were more or less supportive even though they did not necessarily vocalize that support:

I'd just say pretty neutral. I mean....my friends, I don't know about the women. Ok? But we have a strong group of friends and they're all accepting, but they don't necessarily say anything too negative or too positive one way or the other (Delta 810-816)
The extended family’s reaction to their son’s gay identity was also colored by religion and similar to the reaction of friends of the participant. However, when families do express rejection, it appears to be more detrimental to the participant and their son. One mother discusses how her religious sister rejected her son. This was especially traumatic because this was her son’s favorite aunt:

Well on my side of the family, he had an aunt that he would've said that she was his favorite aunt, and of course she's the big church goer and she tried to speak religion to him. I mean it was just like all the time. Now she won't even--like (son) goes to her house to see (cousin), his cousin, and pick her up and they'll go out to eat. She won't even come out of her bedroom. That's how bad it's gotten now. She used to at least say: "hi" and give him a kiss and....over the years it's gotten worse and worse.

(Xi 749-755)

Severe religious rejection was also an experience for another mother in this study who discusses how her own aunt, who is part of the Evangelical Free Church, treated her gay son at family gatherings:

So, I had it two years in a row (referring to hosting Christmas) (family member’s partner) really only wanted to come here because it was where he felt the most comfortable. He didn’t want to go where....(family member’s) sister had it (crosstalk with husband). Yeah, (aunt) ignored (son) she didn't say hello to (son) like at family functions. She'd give people hugs and totally ignore (son) (Gamma 718-722)
Fortunately, not all religious family members were rejecting. One participant commented on how her husband’s Lutheran family welcomed son, even if she did have to advocate for him initially:

   You know, it took a while with (son’s boyfriend), but you know when (son) asked if he could come and meet the family it was Thanksgiving, and (son’s boyfriend) didn't have any place to go. (Husband) said: "Oh, I don't know it's family" and I looked at him and I said: "It's (son)'s family too". So, we asked the rest of the family, and they're like: "Sure!" So, (son’s boyfriend) was a part of our family from then on. (Xi 790-794)

**Community Setting.** Participants were also aware of the setting in which they lived and were able to recognize how this setting influenced acceptance of their son’s gay identity. Specifically, parents complained about how living in a rural community meant that their neighbors have poor boundaries and are over-involved in the family’s affairs. One mother discusses her experience:

   Yeah, and we live in a small community so I didn't feel I could say anything to anybody at work and my husband would always say: "I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to talk about it. Well I'm just not going to talk about this." So....It's like everybody's suffering silently in silence (Lambda 904-907)

Another participant also commented on this dynamic referring to the community that he lived in as “problematic” because everyone knows everyone else’s secrets:

   I mean everybody knows everybody's business, and that's part of the problem at that time. I'm sure a lot of people knew it before I did--besides these friends, you
know? People probably picked up on things that I wasn't even thinking about. (Eta 821-824)

**Political Stance.** Political ideology helped frame the participant’s view of their son’s gay identity. For parents who identified as more democratic and liberal leaning, acceptance of gay men appears to be easier. Acceptance of gay men was more frequently associated with other liberal beliefs as well. One father summed up his political beliefs through a sign that he has posted in his yard. In addition, he discusses the response of his community to the sign:

So we actually came across a sign that was posted in front of my chiropractor's office and spoke with her about it. It begins with: "I believe….I believe that Black Lives Matter. I believe that love is love. I believe life of water" or something--"life is water. I believe in--" a few other things I can't recall exactly but, it's a series of little statements and my wife (wife) contacted the chiropractor to find where it was, where she had received it. She got it online. She subsequently ordered 10 signs and we posted one in front of our house. One of our neighbors who we've known since the time we moved into this community came to us and wanted to know where we got it and we gave her one. (Iota 328-339)

It appears as though having support from the community made it easier for this father to accept his son, knowing that many of his neighbors also held the same political beliefs as he did. One mother also expressed gratitude for living in a more “progressive” area. Not only was she aware of the level of acceptance that was afforded to gay men, but her son also commented on it as well:
I'm so happy that we live in an area where it's... very progressive. In fact, 10 years ago when we were thinking of moving to Virginia and (son) made a comment about: "well, you're not going to see me moving down there because...." it's just a completely different climate with those feelings so.... (Kappa 204-208)

**Workplace.** Several participants spoke about negative experiences that that they had in terms of their places of work. Some participants were so concerned of retaliation or discrimination that they kept their son’s gay identity quiet. One father, who was a state trooper, commented on how he only felt comfortable telling one other co-worker that his son is gay:

Researcher: Were there any big beliefs or things, obstacles that were in your way that prevented you from kind of coming to terms with (son) being gay. Like anything that you can really identify--

Participant: It was probably my job. My career. My job. I definitely did not.... bring it forward to those around me other than one trooper that I worked with who's still the only trooper contact that I still retain a relationship with, him and his family.

They certainly knew about (son), this fellow Ron, he and I served together in various assignments and they were well aware of it. (Iota 999-1007)

Another participant who worked in a hospital setting commented on the discrimination and homophobia that she experienced while working. She discusses a difficult moment with two lesbian partners:

I was at a hospital and I saw first-hand how difficult it was sometimes for gay partners to be part of the healthcare decisions, and how--one instance in particular, a woman who's partner was in for ovarian cancer, and she was afraid to leave--I
guess she didn't have a good relationship with the parents and stuff like that, so she was afraid to leave the room because if she did she wouldn't be able to get back in or be a part of her partner's care. (Kappa 176-181)

This mother also commented on how the discrimination she saw was not just systemic (i.e. laws that prevented same-sex individuals from being involved in their partner’s hospital care), but also how that discrimination showed up on an individual level. She discusses a doctor that openly made homophobic comments:

So, I remember one doctor saying that he had a gay couple, and the one man recommended his father-in-law to come in and he's like: "oh that's disgusting" and somebody else in the office agreed. So, I kind of clammed up and I didn't discuss things with people because I just didn't want to hear negative opinions. (Kappa 189-192)

Similar to the previous participant, the lack of acceptance from her workplace made it difficult for her to discuss her son’s gay identity and eliminated a potential source of support.

**Community Awareness.** Participants in this study came to witness their family members lack of awareness as they themselves grew in self-awareness. One mother commented on how stunned she was that her own mother did not realize how un-accepting and unaware she was:

Oh we told her! and she didn’t handle it, but I mean she just denies it. Like it’s just a non-issue. I don't know if you were familiar with that story "Prayers for Bobby". I had my second son sit with her one day and watch that show and at the end of it she
just came to me and said: "Oh (Participant) you are nothing like that"…. that wasn't for me. (Alpha 186-202)

Another participant in this study also commented on how amazed she was by the lack of awareness of gay related issues in her community. These individuals openly rejected her son and still sought out her services as a nurse. She discusses her frustration with these individuals:

I've been a nurse for 47-48 years, and then in the last 10 I've been a nurse practitioner and some of those assholes have had the gall to come to me as a practitioner. Just like that I would be glad to see them! (laughs) I'm thinking: "You dumb bastard you just don't get it at all?" you know? “How bad you've hurt my family and myself and (laughs)”. It's hard for you to keep your composure and yet you're thinking: "you're talking to the preacher's wife here too" but this is me so.....Like: "would you like to have a rectal exam with fire or something?" (Lambda 472-483)

This sub-section highlighted a step outside of the mentality of both parent and child as well as the family system. This section focused on how the view of the participant and their son by the community influenced the acceptance process. A main property of this section was religion. When participants in this study experienced rejection from the community it was almost always rooted in religious beliefs. For participants who held their own personal religious beliefs, this brand of rejection created another obstacle that they had to maneuver. In addition, those participants that live in a more rural setting highlighted a lack of privacy. This lack of privacy made it difficult for the family to reveal their son’s sexual identity at their discretion. In addition, this dynamic created
isolation as the participants did not know whom to trust. In contrast, when the participant lived in a more liberal community setting, they were more likely to experience acceptance, or at the very least not experience overt rejection.

Many of the workplace settings also created barriers for participants as they feared rejection or ramifications at work. In addition, many participants also witnessed homophobic statements and interactions at their places of work, leading them to feel less comfortable discussing their son with others. The participants in this study also became aware of the lack of knowledge and self-awareness that members of their community had regarding what it means to identify as gay. Community members made hateful comments that they did not realize were hurtful due to ignorance. This became a source of frustration for many participants and served to impede acceptance.

Religion

The sub-category of religion is one of the more complicated categories within this study. Religion and spiritual beliefs run through many of the themes in this study and fuel many of the reactions that participants had to their gay son. Religious beliefs were referenced enough by participants in this study that they religion is able to stand on its own as a sub-category. The interaction between religion and acceptance was also complex. The level of flexibility participants display with their beliefs appears to play a role. The more willing the participants were to renegotiate their beliefs; the more likely acceptance was to occur. The level of priority that participants gave to religion appears to be associated with the level of acceptance they expressed towards their son. Participants in this study discuss reconciling their faith with their son’s gay identity. In addition, this reconciliation did not pertain to just the participant themselves. These participants discuss
navigating the reactions of spiritual institutions, family members, and friends. The three properties that comprise the religion sub-category are: Religious Beliefs, Church Reaction, and Religious Flexibility

**Religious Beliefs.** The presence of religious beliefs is important to consider as not all participants reported being religious. When religion or faith was not involved, it appears as though these particular participants had one less hurdle that needed to be processed before they could come to accept their son. One mother who was not religious discusses her view of religion and how she believed there was hypocrisy in the views of some of her more religious family members:

she never said anything mean, but very Bible thumping: "and the Bible says, and the bible says" and I don't know the Bible well enough, but I also hear people say: "uh-huh, uh-huh" cause there's--I guess in the Bible there were some gay people? They don't seem to remember those people (laughs) (Zeta 1098-1105)

In the above example, this participant was able to quickly move through the discussion of religion as it was not a main part of her core belief system. However, some participants struggled significantly with the interaction of their religious beliefs and their son’s gay identity. One father discusses his struggle:

I believe the Bible cover to cover so--and I also believe, maybe now more so than ever, that (son) truly is a believer but it's hard for me to wrap all that together you know? I don't know, I guess I was maybe even angry and disappointed at God. You know, I don't think I'm homophobic but....why my son, you know? (Eta 18-22)

This participant identified as a Baptist Preacher and religion and spirituality are a major part of his belief system. When his son came out as a gay, he had to reconcile the
teachings of the Bible, his background, and his profession with his son’s sexual identity. This process was difficult and elicited feelings of anger and stress.

**Church Reaction.** In addition to their own internal struggle, many participants discuss the reactions of their place of worship. When the spiritual institution was not accepting of the participant’s gay son, the reaction appears to be detrimental to the parent’s experience, and also had a negative impact on the son’s experience with spirituality and religion. One mother discusses an interaction that occurred between her pastor and her son:

Well and he struggled with our pastor. Our pastor, he seemed like he was going to help us with that, you know? Being more comfortable, how to approach it. He actually.... upset (son) because, you know, they tried to get him to go to this camp where they.... convert you, and....he was scared! Because he brought another Church member that we knew and they came to his apartment, and they asked if they could come in and talk to him. He said: "yeah" and man.... the guy that came with our Pastor was just like, he could pray you out of that. So they were just really, really.... you know....didn't have any compassion. (Son) after that, barely would go to Church. (Xi 109-120)

Some participants experienced more extreme reactions from their faith institutions. One mother in this study, whose husband identified as a Pastor, discusses how his Church attempted to remove him after his son came out as a gay:

We even had a guy that came from the state association who wouldn't have any authority over our Church, but he was like, would help facilitate discussions and stuff between the pastor and the people and he said: "Now you're wanting to get rid
of your Pastor, you know, can you tell me why?" and everybody would just sit around with their teeth in their mouth and didn't say a word. He said: "Is he not a good preacher?" "Oh, no, he's a good preacher" "Is he not a good Pastor? Doesn't take care of the sick?" "Oh, no, he does real good at that" you know? and everything was real good. No one had one bad thing to say about him, but they wanted him to leave, but they didn't have the balls to say: "we don't want a preacher with a gay son" You know? (Lambda 458-467)

However, not all of the reactions to their son’s gay identity were negative, especially on the individual level. One participant discusses how, even though her church was not as accepting as she wanted them to be, she had a supportive friend in the church who did not waiver when her son came out:

Yeah I would say (husband) and then I did have someone at Church. She was a teacher around here. Her and (son) got along really super well. When he came out, she just came up to him and she gave him a hug and said: "(Son) it'll be ok" and so she talked to him a little bit. She would come to me and she'd go: "Is it going alright? Do you need something?" (Xi 928-932)

Participants that experienced warmth and acceptance from church members were grateful and also acknowledge how this experience made it easier for their son to sort through the intersection between spirituality and sexuality.

**Religious Flexibility.** When participants held strong religious beliefs as their son came out as a gay, they appear to experience a level of frustration and confusion regarding how they should respond to their son’s identity. Parents that explore more flexible or open interpretations of religious tenants appear to re-work their spiritual
beliefs so that they would incorporate their son’s sexual identity. One major aspect of this was re-interpreting verses of the Bible. One mother discusses her process with scripture:

I did have to get out my Bible and read different things and I struggled with that. Who was I talking to? They looked at me and they said: "You know that sin is not any worse than what other people do. Because the Bible said a sin is a sin." I looked at that and I thought: "I didn't think about that". She said: "You know, it's not for us to judge him. God will do the judging" So, that helped me with that part. Really did. (Xi 867-872)

While this participant stated that the Bible says being gay is a sin, she ultimately came to the conclusion that it does not matter if it is. It is not her place to pass judgment on others. The only one who can do that is her higher power. She was then able to let go of the frustration because it is not for her to decide what is right and what is wrong. When participants practiced a more firm or fundamental view of religion, there appears to be less space for them to accept their son. This then led to restrictions on the activities that they would engage in with their son. One mother discusses how she and her husband differed in their approach to their son’s gay identity:

We were watching EWTN one night and they had a caller call in and ask, said that their son was gay and was going to get married and asked the priest if they should go to the wedding. Well, of course, the priest said: "No, cause if you go to the wedding, you're condoning what they're doing". So, (husband) said: "See! I told you! I told you!" Well, I'm still going to go. You know, it may be my sin too but.... that’s my kid. I can't not support him. (Mu 462-467)
The above example is significant because it acknowledges a stricter interpretation of Biblical and religious teachings. In addition, it highlights the discord between two spouses over the acceptance of their son’s gay identity. On one hand, the son’s father is opposed to attending his wedding because it would communicate approval of his gay identity. On the other hand, the participant would attend the son’s wedding because she feels it is her duty as a mother to be there for her son. It appears as though acceptance is dependent upon where their son and their religious beliefs rank, in terms of priorities for the parent. If religion is the higher priority, then rejection appears to be more likely. If their son is the higher priority, then acceptance appears to occur through the re-working of religious beliefs.

Religion was one of the more complicated sub-categories within this study. Overall, when religion was relevant to that particular participant and their son, it was typically a barrier to acceptance. However, it is important to note that not all members of the religious community were rejecting, and several participants even cited members of their congregation as being an important source of support. In addition, having religious beliefs did not automatically indicate a lack of acceptance. However, the level of fundamentalism or rigidity of those beliefs did appear to be associated with a lack of acceptance which created another barrier that participants need to work through. The main question that appears to come out of the topic was religion was: “where do this participant’s priorities lie?” If the participant prioritized religion over their child, then the expectation was that the child conform to those religious beliefs (i.e. rejection of gay identity). However, if their son was the higher priority then the participants would re-work their religious beliefs to incorporate their son’s identity (i.e “only God can judge”).
Time

Time was one of the most frequently mentioned aspects in regard to coming to a place of acceptance. In much the same way that their gay son needed time to come to terms with their sexual identity, so too did their parents. The more time that had passed, the more likely participants were to have come to terms with their son’s gay identity and to have moved to a place of acceptance. Time was also referenced in terms of the “time period” with many participants stating that freedoms and liberties that gay individuals enjoy in our present time, did not exist when they themselves were a child. Participants also referred to time through discussions of age. Many participants espoused the idea that being younger made it easier to understand a gay identity, whereas being older made acceptance more challenging. Time also severed to decay knowledge and experiences. Many parents reported struggling to recall specific events around the period that their son came out due to the amount of time that had passed since the event. Time is a complex external force as it both improved or impeded the acceptance process for participants.

The five properties that encompass time are: Time Period, Memory Loss, Age of Family Member, Acceptance Occurrence

Time Period. The changing eras that participants experienced through the course of their lives was an important component of acceptance. Participants stated that acceptance of gay individuals is relatively new and was not something that they experienced until they were already adults. In addition, participants also referred to the way in which gay individuals were treated in the past, versus what they have witnessed in the present. One father commented on how shocked he was that his son had straight friends, stating that in the past, something like this would never have occurred:
Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! I mean.... you know....his inner circle of friends....straight, gay, it doesn't matter and honestly that, I see that, that wouldn't of happened back when I was younger. Just the way you were raised, you know, you stayed away from gay because it was going to rub off. (Epsilon 505-516)

This participant acknowledges not only the differences between when he was a child and the current time period, but also drew attention to the misinformation that he was given while growing up. For this father, friendships between gay and straight people were a foreign concept. For one mother, the mere existence of gay people was something that was questioned. She discusses how when she was growing up, being gay was something that you simply kept hidden:

I'm gonna put it to you like this. I was around a lot of gay people. Because now that I'm out of school, which I've been for years, it's amazing how many gay people I went to school with. Oh! Oh! You know? It's just like: "I never knew you were gay". Well of course because back then we really hid it. (Zeta 228-238)

Many participants did not have relationships with gay individuals due to the lack of safety that existed during the period of time in which they grew up. If someone was a gay, they kept it hidden for fear that they would be harmed.

**Memory Loss.** A frequent phenomenon throughout this study was a loss of knowledge or memory regarding the coming out experience. When asked certain details, many participants could not recall how they responded or the events that transpired. One mother struggled to remember how her son had personally handled the coming out process: “A little more attention to his dress. I don't know. I don't really. We're talking going back 15 years at least. Well, more than that. So, it's kind of, you know, I can't
really remember it being rough.” (Kappa 378-381). In this example, details about her son’s coming out experience have been lost in time. This is due to the fact that she processed her son’s gay identity and his coming out experience, years ago. Another mother had a similar experience when trying to recall the timeline of events that occurred in regard to her son’s coming out process:

No....I think he was out of school then. I think he was out of college, but like we didn't do stuff.... or didn't know any of his friends at the beginning, and he like....or maybe this was when he still lived at home but he had already told us (Gamma 637-643)

Time complicated the understanding of the acceptance process as many participants struggled to remember the details of the events that led up to their son coming out as gay.

**Age.** How old an individual is upon hearing that their son is gay was also a topic of discussion. On average, participants stated that younger generations had an easier time coming to a place of acceptance as opposed to someone who is older. This appears to be due to the belief by participants that younger generations have had more exposure to gay men and gay culture. One father mentioned how the children in his extended family were accepting of his son’s gay identity: “Researcher: Ok, but in terms of like the extended family, like the people that came everybody was open and accepting or....? Participant: Yeah! I mean all the kids....all the kids got along great” (Delta 661-668). Another participant openly discusses how her other son accepted her gay son more easily than she did. She attributes this to their youth and their level of awareness of what it means to be gay:
I don't think it was that big an adjustment for his siblings as it was for me. Just because I was so shocked, you know? Just never--just never really....I don't know, never came up, never crossed my mind. You know? and I think them being younger they probably accepted it a lot easier than I did and probably already thought: "yeah, that makes sense" you know?  (Beta 287-294)

Acceptance Occurrence. The most commonly referenced aspect of time was that it simply took participants a period of time to understand. The majority of participants referenced this idea. The initial shock, loss, grief, and feelings of being overwhelmed, simply took time to sort through. Once participants were given the space to think through what it meant that their son was gay, they were able to move to a place of acceptance. One mother was honest about her process: “It took me a long time to be able to say the words: "I have a son (son) and he's gay"” (Lambda 602-603). One participant discusses the emotional component of coming to acceptance. For this participant, it took time for him to work through all of the fear he had regarding his son’s progression through life as well as his safety:

About how he would be looked upon and how difficult life can be for someone in the workforce....jobs, socially amongst our own community, and friends that we have or have had at that time. I think that was the big fear factor of that. Plus, the uncertainty of having grown up, gone through the 80s and the AIDS issues. I was very, very concerned about the possibility of sexual transmission, AIDS, HIV. In a nutshell that's about where I came to at that point. I slowly graduated to where we are now. (Iota 34-40)
Participants were able to acknowledge that once the initial had worn off, they were able to manage their emotions and understand what it meant to have a son who was gay.

Time served and over-arching external factor within this study. The most frequently referred to aspect of time was the fact that participants need space to process their son’s identity as a gay man. The more time that the participant was given, the more likely they were to have taken steps towards acceptance. The time period that the participant grew up in and age both appear to be complicating factors that made the acceptance process more difficult. Memory loss was a complicating factor in that this loss of information due to time creates a blank spot in the data, potentially obscuring important information that would illuminate what these participants went through on their acceptance journey.

**Category 5: Adaptability**

The final category incorporates two major components of the acceptance process. The first component contains aspects of their son’s personality that participants had to adjust to as their son came to express themselves. The second piece is the participant’s willingness to create space for their son in the family dynamic in a way that would acknowledge and embrace their son’s gay identity. Together these components create the concept of adaptability. There are two sub-categories that form the category of adaptability: *Gender* and *Openness*. Category 5 is displayed in Table 3.6.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subcategory</th>
<th>Property</th>
<th>Dimension</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1. Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>a. Non-conformity</td>
<td>(rejection to acceptance)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Family Impact</td>
<td>(minor to major)</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. Conflation</td>
<td>(absent to present)</td>
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<td><strong>2. Openness</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>a. Comfort</td>
<td>(absent to present)</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Desire to Understand</td>
<td>(absent to present)</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. Activism/Advocating</td>
<td>(absent to present)</td>
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<td>d. Judgment</td>
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*Table 3.6 Adaptability*
The concept of gender was difficult for many participants to understand as many parents conflated gender with sexual orientation. In addition, many of the sons in this study expressed some level of femininity. At times this expression appears to be difficult for participants to accept. In certain family settings, an adherence to gender roles (i.e. the binary) was also expected, further complicating the relationship between parent and son. Many participants also worried about how their son’s gender expression would impact the rest of the family. The following properties encompass the gender sub-category: non-conformity, family impact, conflation.

**Non-conformity.** When faced with their son’s non-conforming gender expression, parents either choose to accept the non-conformity, or display some resistance to it. In addition, the son was also aware of their parents’ gender expectations and would at times attempt to conform. One mother discusses how her son tried to conform to gender norms in order to impress his father:

Participant: He always showed other signs that he was gay and tried so hard to fit in the traditional lifestyle we expected, even so much as signing up to play football in Jr. High, but realized he hated contact sports and skipped practice after practice until the coach called to check on him. This was a big red flag.

Researcher: So it seems like another vehicle is the fact that he wasn’t fitting into traditional roles in the way that you would expect him to?
Participant: Correct. He only signed up for football to attempt to get his father's approval... My heart broke for him. (Omicron 46-55)

However, some participants were able to embrace their son’s non-conformity and even enjoy the experience. One mother discusses her appreciation for her son who is a drag queen: “He's going to do make-up when he comes. I have--me and my girlfriend he's going to come do our makeup. And he's like: "well mom, I only know how to do drag make-up, soooo.... this is what you're going to get"” (Alpha 970-972)

**Family Impact.** Some participants within the study were less concerned about the expression itself, and more concerned with how the son’s gender expression would impact the family. One mother was concerned with how her son’s gender non-conformity would impact her son and his siblings:

I think more acceptance of just who and where he is. I bet you that conversation came around the dressing, because that was my only...that was really my only rule. Not "don't be gay" or you know "don't experiment" or whatever. It was "don't cross-dress at school" (Alpha 533-536)

Another common theme in terms of the interaction between gender non-conformity and the family dynamic was the concept of “respect”. Participants discuss acknowledging and following the gender binary as a means of showing respect. One father stated that while he acknowledges that his son does have some feminine traits and habits, he expects him to present as male when he is around family:

Participant: Yeah....on his birth certificate he's a male. He's a male, and he should--even though he's got those differences--should present himself as a male. Now, what I don't know (laughs), you know what I'm saying? I mean I'm not quite sure. I
just--“don't come around, you know, wearing a dress” or....yeah. If you get what I'm saying yeah.

Researcher: Right. Right. So, it would have made things harder--

Participant: Yes, very difficult

Researcher: and yeah that's because, again, like this is--like you said: "birth certificate, it says male, and you should present that way"

Participant: present that way, yes. Now what you do elsewhere--as long as I don't know, yeah, that's your business.

Researcher: Right. Ok, yeah. So that makes sense. So it's again, it kind of comes back to that respect idea that you're talking about like: "when you're around me, when you're around the family"

Participant: That's correct. It's respect! (Nu 576-595)

**Conflation.** In terms of gender and sexual orientation, participants frequently display confusion in separating the two concepts. In most cases, parents merged them together into one idea. Many times, participants would express discomfort or a struggle that they believed was related to their son being gay, but in reality, was actually due to gender expression. One father discusses being able to tell if someone is gay, based on mannerisms: “His buddy from way back when. He's kind of.... he’s probably my age. He's older.... you know he's gay just by the way he acts, talks, and stuff.” (Epsilon 1538-1540). Another participant explained that they were shocked when their son came out as a gay because he did not display any of the “signs”. When this father described the signs that he was looking for, he described gender expression:
Probably why it was such a shock to me at the time because he did like to do boy stuff, you know? He didn't sit around playing with dolls--he may have some with his sister but, we lived in the country then too growing up. He just had his sister to play with, we didn't have any other kids real close, but I don't think he was--you know, he had bb guns and everything else that normal boys have. So that probably did make it more of a shock to me because he acted like a little boy. (Eta 1085-1090)

The main focus of this sub-section is making space for the participant’s gay son within the family. Some parents struggled with gender norm violations, even though they did not have the language to express this struggle. In addition, the concept of “respect” appears when parents when parents wanted to keep boundaries around the expression of their son’s identity as a gay man or their feminine gender expression. Parents who were more comfortable with non-conformity were able to see the positives in their son’s gender violations and did not experience these violations as a barrier to acceptance. However, if parents were less comfortable and more worried about the opinions their community, then they were more likely to resist their son’s expression. This led to conflict and impeded the acceptance process.

**Openness**

Participants that display a willingness to understand their son’s experience as a gay man, appear to have an easier time coming to a place of acceptance. By being open, participants kept the lines of communication clear and were able to continue their relationship with their son. In addition, they were able to have experiences with their son that helped them better understand what it means to be gay. The ability to withstand or
tolerate negative or difficult emotions throughout their son’s coming out process, appears to help move participants to a place of acceptance. The following properties envelop the openness sub-category: comfort, desire to understand, activism/advocating, judgment, flexibility, and struggle

**Comfort.** The ability to discuss gay topics and be in the presence of gay interactions was a matter frequently broached by participants. The parents in this study had varying levels of comfort in regard to discussing the gay aspects of their son’s life. One major area of contention was PDA (Public Displays of Affection). Many parents struggled with observing their son being intimate with their partners. One mother described her family’s discomfort with PDA:

I think the whole family was here. Might have even been at Christmas, and (son)’s sitting on his lap and they're lovey-dovey and I think I had already said.... you know, I accept you the way you are, but I can't take the lovey-dovey stuff (crosstalk husband: makes comment that married kids don't do that). Yeah! Even that's what we tried to say. You know: "(married kids) don't do that. (other married kids) don't do that". If they do, it's a peck on the.... lips or whatever, but it's not like uh....passionate kiss or....sitting on each other's laps (Gamma 1018-1024)

For this participant, PDA has a time and place. In addition, this participant expresses acceptance for her son’s gay identity but draws that line at seeing a physical display of affection. Another participant also discusses his discomfort with PDA. In this situation, the participant was grateful that his son’s gay friends did not engage in PDA while in his presence: “I never did see that amongst those friends--holding hands, you know what I'm saying? Because that would--I guess it would make me feel uncomfortable, or it could
make someone that's straight feel uncomfortable, you know?” (Nu 486-488). It seems that for participants, physical displays of affection push them out of their comfort zone and impede the acceptance process. However, some participants were also able to acknowledge that this lack of comfort may have more to do with them than their son’s identity as a gay man. One father discusses how he was grateful that one of his own friends that is gay does not act feminine around him. He also acknowledges that his personal discomfort with someone being themselves is an area of growth for him:

I know that.... he said the other day: "Yeah, well I just don't act that way around you" and I said "I appreciate that" (laughs), but I don't. You know, if that is a flaw, I probably still have it. I don't know. (Epsilon 1557-1559)

Desire to Understand. Participants in this study frequently want to know more about their son’s experience, even if they were still struggling to accept them. This desire for knowledge and communication served to keep the participant involved in their son’s life and made them open to growing their level of knowledge. One father expressed shock over the amount of alcohol that his son’s last boyfriend was able to drink. Upon hearing that gay men are more likely to suffer from substance abuse and addiction, he expressed concern and curiosity: “Researcher: like I was telling her, like a lot a--like within the gay community it's 1 in 3 guys have a substance abuse problem. So.... Participant: (sighs) whether it be alcohol or other?” (Delta 1289-1296). Another father more explicitly expressed how he and his wife had a desire to understand his son’s experience:

We've always had conversations with our son. When I discovered that I needed to educate myself, my wife also, we would talk! We would talk about (inaudible). I'd
like to think that we represented an open--I'd like to think we had an open door on the subject. (Iota 804-813)

General curiosity and openness to learning more, appears to be just as important as actually having the necessary knowledge they need to understand their son’s experience. The willingness of parents to try to understand and learn, provided them with opportunities to connect with their son, fostering acceptance.

**Activism and Advocacy.** Upon taking steps towards acceptance, participants also begin to have a desire to advocate for the injustices that their son experienced or could experience as a gay man in society. It appears as though a sense of anger at the lack of equality helps galvanize parents into standing up for their son. One father discusses his experience as he came to be an advocate for LGBTQ+ rights, and his decision to no longer be silent:

Now, both my wife and I both have said, we can't be silent anymore. We can't be just silent supporters. We have to be vocal about it. When people express a view that they feel that...is so much against our thinking and our belief, we've got to call them on it. By putting the sign up front, by putting a Biden for president sign out front because I'm tired of seeing Trump signs plastered all over the place.... We’re going to make a statement. You know, I'm tired of hearing it. (Iota 349-357)

Another mother discusses how she wants other children, who are struggling with their sexual identity, to know that things will get better:

I mean I've donated to like garden state equality and...."It Gets Better Project", I usually make a yearly donation to them. There was a book one time that "It Gets Better" they published, and you could purchase a book for your high school. So, I
did that a number of years ago so that there was a book like that up at the library at my son's high school. (Kappa 171-175)

Other participants also work on a more micro-level in terms of advocacy. One mother discusses how she wanted to use her experience of walking with her son through the coming out process, to help others at her church. She discusses how she helped other members of her church work through sexual identity issues:

I just, I told our pastor that I don't consider myself a teacher or.... you know, a Bible scholar or anything like that, but I told him if someone was struggling, and they need to talk to somebody who'll go through that…. I’d be glad to talk to them. I said: "I don't know how much good it would be, but at least they have someone to talk to that went through that." So, you know, it's been years, but I've--I talked to somebody years ago, and then a real close friend of mine from Church, she called me, she said: "(Participant) I need to talk to you about something." Kind of knew that this girl was gay too. She said, she was crying, and she said: "Taylor told me that she was gay and that her partner was her best friend and I just accepted her as a friend. She's been in the house a lot of times" and so it kind of surprised her with that, but she was like me, she saw the signs, but still as a parent.... You’re still not prepared for that. Yeah, there's been a couple of families that I've gotten to talk to and....they say it's helping; you know with keeping their son talking to them.

In the above example, this mother was able to use her struggle and experience with her son, to help guide and support other members of her church. Her goal being to keep the parent and the son in communication with each other.
**Judgment.** Participants also discuss abandoning judgment. In several situations, moving to acceptance meant that parents realized that they cared more about their son having good people in their life versus being concerned with whether or not those people identified as heterosexual. One mother explained her philosophy on the kinds of people she wants to be around her son: “(son) can bring anybody over I don't care what they are don't make any difference to me, as long as they're good people I don't care” (Zeta 624-630). Another participant discusses how he and his family have abandoned judgment as a value, acknowledging that it is not their place to judge others: “We, you know, we don't judge and there's only one person that's going to judge us in life....and that's when we're gone.” (Epsilon 1434-1435). This father was more concerned about the quality of the people that were in his son’s life, versus being concerned with aspects of their identity.

**Flexibility.** A lack of rigidity in the way that participants view the world also appears to help encourage acceptance. By being flexible, parents opened themselves up to new people and opportunities. Flexibility came more easily when they can identify the good in accepting someone who is gay. One father discusses this realization with his son’s teacher who is transgender and is passionate about teaching and being present for her students:

yeah I think that has helped probably seen her--like I said for years and she's a very very dedicated teacher and goes above and beyond, she does the yearbook and stuff like that. Very supportive, not only in-school, but out of school with the kids....and she probably has a little sense of that too that she really has to go above and beyond to prove herself because she probably knows how people--some people think about her. (Delta 440-445)
Another father expressed flexibility for different reasons. Upon working through his son’s gay identity, he came to realize that he wanted his son to experience love in his life and that it did not matter what kind of love his son embraced:

If you love somebody, you love somebody, and I'm happy for you. Because we only get a short period of time on this planet and achieving that is probably one of the greatest things you can do for yourself. Is having the ability to love and be loved. (Iota 984-986)

**Embracing the Struggle.** Coming to a place of acceptance was not easy for participants in this study. However, a unique aspect of these parents was that they did not shy away from that struggle. These parents were open and honest about the fact that they did not understand, and that they made mistakes on the way to accepting their son as a gay man. One mother was candid about her struggle with understanding her son:

I....thank God that I wasn't working because I really thought I would drive into one of those medians, because I just couldn't deal with it. So, I'm being very honest, I couldn't deal with it. I could not.... during the 6 weeks that he was gone I did a lot of thinking....and I said to myself: "What I do behind closed doors is my business. What he does behind closed doors is his business", as long as he's a good person. That's all that matters. So that’s when--how I came around and accepted it. (Zeta 31-50)

Another father also acknowledges his struggle towards acceptance and how he still at times struggles to accept others for different reasons. However, he also continued to express a willingness to embrace that struggle and listen to the people around him. He referred to his struggle with individuals who violate gender norms: “maybe years ago it
would have been a problem, but I, you know, I'm going to talk to you” (Epsilon 1635-1636). Participants did not shy away from difficult emotions or experiences. They were open and honest about their internal struggle with coming to acceptance, but they did not give up just because it was difficult.

The key component of this sub-category is engagement. Participants in this study were active in adapting to their son’s identity as a gay man. These participants had a desire to fill in the gaps in their knowledge regarding gay life. In addition, many parents went above and beyond and became advocates for the gay community, whether that be on a micro or macro scale. These participants were also not afraid to engage in the discomfort and struggle that came with changing their understanding surrounding what it means to be gay. These participants also ultimately recognize that they need to suspend judgment in terms of think about whether or not their son’s sexual identity is “right” or “wrong”. Instead, they expressed flexibility in changing their thoughts and beliefs so that their son would have a place in their life.

Model of Progressive Acceptance

This study examined the journey of heterosexual parents as they came to accept their gay sons. This journey has been conceptualized into a model called Progressive Acceptance (see Figure 1 in Appendix A). This section describes that model. There are 5 stages of the journey: Emotional Chaos, Metamorphosis, Return to Parenting, Facing the Community, and Advanced Empathy and Awareness. These stages constitute two main phases: the Crisis phase and the Rebuilding phase. Finally, time as a concept is highlighted throughout the model of Progressive Acceptance. The more time that parents are given, the more stable in their emotions they become. In addition, when parents are
given more time to work through their feelings and gain knowledge, their level of acceptance increases.

**Emotional Chaos**

In the initial phases of this journey, levels of acceptance are minimal. Parents are caught in their own emotional state as they try to sort through the feelings that have arisen upon hearing that their son is gay. Even upon identifying their own emotions, parents still need time to sort through these feelings and will engage in various coping mechanisms (e.g., humor) in order to create a sense of stability. The process of experiencing negative feelings and then working through these feelings with coping mechanisms is referred to as the *Emotional Chaos Stage*.

**Metamorphosis**

Once parents have returned to a state of equilibrium and have spent enough time processing their emotions they move into the next stage of the model, the *Metamorphosis Stage*. During metamorphosis, parents engage in more tangible “work”. This work involves aspects such as: dispelling gay stereotypes, becoming more aware of issues impacting the gay community (and therefore their son), embarking on a quest for resources (e.g., consulting mental health professionals or respected others, acquiring and reading literature on gay issues), and becoming aware of the experiences that their son has gone through as a gay man. It is noticeable when parents come to the end of this phase as there is a focus on sharing learned knowledge with others. Throughout the interview process, participants would speak to this researcher as though they were a parent struggling to accept their son, sharing their knowledge and experience on how they came to understand their son’s sexual identity. The emotional chaos stage and the
metamorphosis stage constitute the *Crisis Phase* of coming to acceptance. During this phase, the parent is focused on their own internal state (i.e., emotions and lack of knowledge). Many parents report withdrawing from their relationship with their son for a period of time in order to engage in this process. This is a critical time period in the movement towards acceptance. Parents need time and space to work through their concerns and to grieve the loss of a heterosexual future that will not happen.

**Return to Parenting**

The *Return to Parenting Stage* marks the beginning of the Rebuilding Phase. This phase involves the movement of heterosexual parents of gay sons out of their own internal work into a focus on their child’s experience and a focus on the reactions of their own community. The internal work that these parents did in the crisis phase is not “done”. However, they have reached a point where they now have enough stability and space that they can begin to look outside of themselves and explore how their son’s sexual identity is impacting their world. In the Return to Parenting phase, the participants focused on “catching up” with their son’s experiences. Until their son came out to them, they were unaware that their son identified as gay. This means that they were unaware of their son’s experiences as a gay man, who their son’s friends are within the LGBTQ+ community, and any past or current romantic relationships that they have had. In addition, parents also focus on general parenting concerns. These concerns typically relate to their child’s mental health, whether or not their son has enough support, how engaged their son is with the family, and their son’s relationship with any siblings that they may have. When parents begin to focus on these concerns, they have reached a milestone in their progression towards acceptance. Parents in this stage have accepted
that their son is gay. They still have questions, and they are not sure how to navigate the opinions of others in their community regarding their gay son. However, they are acknowledging that their son’s sexual identity is not going to change and they are beginning to incorporate that identity into their own experience as a parent.

**Facing the Community**

Once participants have re-engaged in parenting behaviors and have started to forge a new relationship with their gay son, they turn to address the opinions of their community. This stage typically involves the highest level of conflict. Parents discuss two main areas of contention that they have in this stage: religion and their social circle. In terms of religion, some parents discuss how their son was rejected by their church pastor, how they were encouraged by other parishioners to protest gay marriage, and even attempts by their religious community to remove them and their son from the institution. While many experiences were negative, several participants discuss positive experiences with individual parishioners who express acceptance and a non-judgmental attitude.

Participants in this study also discuss the need to respond to the reactions of their friends and family. Some parents discuss how they had threatened to cut off their own parents due to their lack of acceptance for their gay son. Other parents had negative interactions with neighbors who endorsed derogatory terms (i.e., calling their son a “fag”). In these situations parents choose to confront these community members setting boundaries in terms of what kind of language they expect them to use when referencing their son. Still other parents report that their family members refused to attend their son’s wedding. These parents then made the decision to cut off these family members from their inner circle due to the anger they experienced as their child and husband was
disrespected. In addition, parents had to contend with the homonegativity that exists in society on the macro level. Parents discuss confronting the homonegative beliefs that exist within the conservative political tradition, and being vocal about their acceptance of their son in the face of religious doctrine that shames him. For many parents, their anger at the way society treats their child helped facilitate their movement into the next stage of acceptance: *Advanced Empathy and Awareness*.

*Advanced Empathy and Awareness*

The final stage of the acceptance process involves increasing complexity in terms of understanding their son’s experience and their role as a parent. For example, one area of complexity that parents address in this stage is gender. Parents varied in their understanding of the difference between sexual orientation and gender. However, these parents were able to understand that how their child expresses themselves does not indicate that they are transgender (i.e., my child preforming as a drag queen does not mean that he identifies as a woman). Parents in this phase are also more likely to engage in activism. Parents discuss confronting friends and family when they make homophobic comments, openly stating that their son is gay and not tolerating negative responses, putting signs or other political material in front of their home that supports the gay community, and even making literature accessible to children and adolescents that are struggling with their sexual identity (e.g., putting supportive literature in their child’s school library).

In terms of participants with religious affiliations, parents moved towards a space of non-judgment. These parents utilized their religious beliefs to *support* their child’s sexual orientation. A common phrase used by these parents was “only God can judge”.
Parents in this phase also were able to express an increased level of flexibility with their beliefs. This appears to be an outcropping of the metamorphosis phase where parents connected to their son’s support system and community. Parents discuss re-evaluating LGBTQ+ individuals. Instead of focusing on their identity or sexual orientation, these parents examine how “good” these people were (i.e. helped their son or daughter, positive engagement with the community, strong work ethic and level of dedication, warmth and inclusiveness that son’s LGBTQ+ support system expressed towards them). In other words, parents engage in values clarification. These values appear to grant parents a sense of peace in coming to accept their son. They took comfort in knowing that their son is surrounded by a group of “good” people. Finally, parents in this stage were able to reflect upon, acknowledge, and embrace the struggle that they went through to accept their gay son. Parents reflected upon harmful religious statements that they espoused to their son, distancing behaviors that they engaged in when their son came out, and regretting not being there for their son when they needed them. Ultimately, parents were able to acknowledge their short-comings, but not become overwhelmed by them. They were also still able to see the growth that was still needed as the continued to move towards enhanced acceptance.

**Progressive Acceptance: Necessary Themes**

In the following section, important themes that occur throughout the acceptance process are highlighted. When participants encountered these themes varied from participant to participant. However, these topics are critical as many of the parents in this study reported experiencing the majority of these themes on their path toward acceptance. Without experiencing the themes that are discussed below, it is likely that parents would
not have successfully moved through each stage in the theory of progressive acceptance and their growing level of acceptance would have been stymied. The critical themes are as follows: parent identity supersedes sexual orientation, the child’s happiness, positive re-framing of religion, desiring contact with their child, wanting child to be themselves, the off-setting reaction, mom magic, parent sub-system, non-traditional mindset facilitates acceptance, emotional tolerance and belongingness.

**Parent identity supersedes other identities**

One of the most crucial pieces of data that came out of this study is that, for these parents, their identity as a parent ranked high in their list of priorities. When placed in situations where the parent had to choose their child or choose a value, they selected the former. This phenomenon was not only witnessed by the principal researcher, but by the multiple coders that were involved in this study. One example of this was when parent Alpha had a discussion with her son about her own mother. She stated that she was willing to cut her mother out of her life for the sake of her son and his well-being. Another mother had a similar response when the topic of disowning her child was broached. Parent Gamma stated that she would love her child no matter who he loved or who he was. Parent Omicron also expressed a similar experience stating that their son’s sexual orientation was not worth sacrificing her relationship with him. Parent Kappa also expressed that she wanted consistent contact with her son regardless of his sexual identity.

**The Child’s Happiness**

When parents expressed that their identity as a parent supersede other values, they also frequently mentioned wanting their child to be happy. This was true for both parents
Delta and Zeta. Parent Iota discusses how important it is that people experience love. He did not care who his child loved as long as he was able to have this experience. Parent Gamma discusses how she backed away from enforcing gender norms (even after receiving advice from her pediatrician that she should continue to enforce them) because she could tell that the enforcement of these norms was making her child unhappy.

Parents also experienced rage over individuals that would cause harm to their child’s mental well-being or sense of happiness. Parent Epsilon expressed fury towards family members who did not attend his son’s wedding. In his opinion, respecting and honoring family is paramount, no matter the orientation of the family member. Anger was also expressed by other parents as well. Parents Delta, Zeta, and Xi all voiced harsh criticism of parents who rejected their child based on their sexual orientation. These three parents expressed that a lack of acceptance of a sexual minority child has more to do with the parent and less to do with the child. They all discuss working through rejection and educating themselves.

**Positive Religious Reframing**

One father, Nu, expressed a moral reasoning regarding why he would never reject his sexual minority son, despite his strong religious convictions. This father stated that the values that he was raised with prioritized the family system and he cannot reject or disown his son because he is part of the family. Some parents did not express rage over the idea of a sexual minority child being rejected, but instead experienced confusion. For example, Parent Eta also expressed similar religious convictions. He struggled with these convictions. However, when the church chose to attack and reject his son, he ultimately came to his son’s defense, choosing him over the opinions and beliefs of the
congregation. In addition, after parent Eta had a near death experience, he further re-evaluated his beliefs and came to the conclusion that he has a good life and a strong family. He was also able to use religion as means of support for his family and his son (i.e. “It made me once again realize how fragile life is and how blessed I am to have my family”, Eta 992-993). Parent Lambda also reported struggling with the intersection of religion and sexual identity. However, she engaged in her own research and was able to find interpretations of the Bible that supported her son. In addition, she defended her son against religious comments made by members of her community. Mother Nu also expressed a strong religious faith. However, she reported that she would attend her son’s wedding because he is her child and she will support him, even if her attendance of his wedding is viewed as sinful. Parents within this stage are at a point where they place their child higher in their list of priorities than religion. Therefore, they are able to utilize religion as a tool that can support their child, rather than condemn them. Positive religious re-framing appears to stem from the clarification of their values and priorities.

Desiring Contact with Their Child

Parents appear to experience distress when they have distance physically and emotionally from their child. Similar to positive religious re-framing, parents place their identity as parents above their beliefs regarding sexual identity. It appears as though parents are willing to sacrifice their beliefs surrounding sexual identity if it means that they can reconnect with their child. Couple C (Iota & Kappa) were both confused as to why accepting their child and their child’s sexual orientation would even come into question. Parent Kappa then went on to discuss how her children are a focal point in her life and she could not imagine moving away from them or not having a relationship with
her son (who she sees on a daily basis). Parent Pi also expressed sympathy for children who were not accepted by their parents and focused on her son’s qualities that made him a joy in her life. Parent Pi also stated that if her family had rejected her son, she would have chosen him over them.

**Wanting Child to be Themselves**

The parents in this study also seemed more willing to give their child space to express themselves. Parent Xi was adamant that her son be who he is and not who he thinks other people want him to be. She held onto this belief even though it violated her religious principles. In fact, parent Xi even used religion as a means of supporting her son and letting him know that he will always be part of the family: “God gave you to us for— you know, we love you! We're not gonna throw you out. We asked for you. I said, you know: "Your struggle is our struggle” (Xi 283-285). In addition, parent Xi’s child was adopted and she stated that she chose him and that he is a major focus of her life. She recanted a story regarding how her son was frequently sick when he was younger and both her and her husband made it clear to their employers that he was their priority. In multiple situations parent Xi chose her son over everything else.

**The Offsetting Reaction**

Another phenomenon that was identified within this study has been referred to by the author as the “offsetting reaction”. Many parents within this study were not necessarily happy that their child is a sexual minority. However, when considering their child’s sexual identity, they would automatically start to balance out, or offset this “negative” aspect of their child’s identity. For example, parents Beta, Gamma, Delta, Epsilon, Eta, Lambda, Mu, and Nu all engaged in the offsetting reaction. When negative
aspects of their child’s identity or potential risk factors were discussed during the interview, these parents would automatically begin to list their child’s positive qualities. These parents would discuss how dedicated, kind, and generous their child is, how driven they are, their excellent work performance or dedication to their career, and their charming personality or their sense of humor. Parents within this study were willing to look past something that they may not necessarily be comfortable with, and see the positive aspects of their child and why it was still worth having a relationship with them.

**Mom Magic**

The impact of mothers within this study cannot be overstated. This author created the term “mother magic” to help encapsulate the impact that mothers have upon the acceptance process. Mothers demonstrated not only a sense of patience with their child as they came to terms with their child’s sexual identity, they also had patience with their husbands. The ability of mothers to sway the opinions of their husbands appears to be crucial. In addition, mothers frequently went back and forth between their husband and their son, serving as peacekeepers. These mothers would push their husbands to break out of unhealthy thinking while simultaneously telling their sons to be patient as their father sorted through their feelings. Mother Lambda reported this experience as both her husband and son’s personalities frequently clash. Mom magic appears to have a large impact in terms of both parents coming to accept their child’s sexual identity. Fathers Delta and Omicron recalled having their wives come to them and simply state that they need to support their son through the coming out process. Both fathers were able to hear these words from their respective wives and began on the path towards acceptance. For father Epsilon, his wife engaged in the offsetting reaction with him, stating that their son
is a good person. She was able to list all of the ways that their son has helped others. This act helped father Epsilon see that his son’s sexual identity is only one aspect of who his son is as a person. One mother also came to this conclusion on her own when struggling with her son’s sexual identity. Mother Zeta expressed shame over needing a period of time to come to terms with her son’s sexual minority status, but ultimately came to realize that her son is a good person that she wants in her life. She then became actively engaged in the acceptance process, reaching out to her son and allowing him to bring his friends around regardless of their sexual identity. Mothers were also involved in educating their husbands on the experience that their child was going through. Father Iota stated that his wife encouraged him to learn more about what it means to be gay, and both parents walked through the acceptance process together. Mother Xi found that her husband needed a balance between discussing their son’s sexual orientation and taking time to process. She worked to push her husband and keep the conversation going, while also respecting his boundaries.

**Parent Sub-System**

The parental sub-system also appears to impact the acceptance process. If both parents were connected and formed a solid unit, they appear to move through the acceptance process in a smoother fashion. In the parental subsystem for Couple C (Iota & Kappa), their strong bond appears to help both of them in terms of being able to lean on one another for support. In addition, Couple C (Iota & Kappa) had an awareness of each other and were able to discuss their partner’s thoughts and feelings on a variety of issues, not just their child’s sexual identity. In addition, they were also aware of each other’s experiences (e.g., having issues with the neighbors accepting their son) and were able to
provide details of those experiences. This is opposed to the parental sub-system for Couple D (Mu & Nu). In this sub-system, the parents appear to be more detached and have conflicting experiences. For example, parent Mu reported wanting more contact with their son stating that he does not speak to them often and rarely visits. This is opposed to Nu’s statements that they do have frequent contact with their son and that he calls them consistently. These parents also appear to have more barriers that they need to work through before they can come to a place of acceptance (e.g., religion; the cause of a sexual minority status). It appears as though miscommunication or a lack of awareness in the parental sub-system can stall acceptance, while a heightened sense of awareness may actually facilitate the acceptance process.

Non-Traditional Mindset Facilitates Acceptance

Parents within this study acknowledge that a less traditional mindset appears to make accepting a sexual minority status easier. Parent Gamma commented on how she had certain traditional aspects (i.e. religion; nuclear family model) that she needed to work through in order to come to a place of acceptance. She recognizes that some of her children were less traditional and appear to adjust to their brother’s sexual minority status with greater ease. Parent Delta also expressed a more traditional family ideal, stating that he wished his son had a partner and a family as this should be a goal for everyone. He did, however, empathize with his son’s experience as a sexual minority. He stated that when he himself was growing up he had a very non-traditional upbringing that he appreciated. It is because of his non-traditional upbringing that he has more space for his son’s sexual minority identity.

Emotional Tolerance and Belongingness
Empathy appears to be connected to the concepts of emotional tolerance and belongingness. Having empathy helped the heterosexual parents in this study come to a place of acceptance due to the fact that it allowed them to acknowledge the negative experiences that their child and other members of the sexual minority community have faced. Parent Delta recalled attending a party that was hosted by his sexual minority son. While he was at this party, he engaged in conversation with many of his son’s sexual minority friends. He was shocked to hear the horror stories of rejection that so many of his son’s friends had experienced at the hands of their own parents. Couple A (Gamma & Delta) expressed empathy and compassion for their son’s friends and took on a parental role in the friend group. They are lovingly referred to as “The Rents”. Parent Delta also described how his own experience growing up and having a non-traditional childhood made it easier for him to accept his son’s sexual minority status. There were many people in Parent Delta’s life that made space for him and, therefore, he was able to make space for his son. The ability to withstand and process emotions appears to be critical in terms of parents coming to accept their sexual minority children. In a study conducted by Diamond and Shpigel (2014) the authors found that parental emotional intolerance did act as a barrier between heterosexual parents and their sexual minority children. It is possible that Parent Delta moved closer to a place of acceptance due to his willingness to be empathetic.

The heterosexual parents in this study took steps to ensure that their child felt welcome in their family. For instance, parent Alpha was willing to cut her mother out of her life in order to make room for her sons’ sexual minority status. Parent Gamma hosted family holiday events as other family members would not invite those in the family with
a sexual minority status. She saw this measure as unkind and divisive. Parent Epsilon, upon discovering that several members of his family did not attend his son’s wedding, is no longer speaking to those family members due to the disrespect that they showed his son and their family. While parent Zeta acknowledges that she took time to come around to her son’s sexual minority status, she made it clear to him that any of his friends are welcome, as long as they are good people. These efforts by the parents in this study to let their children know that they belong in the family can have a significant impact on the well-being of their children. The research indicates that a lack of belongingness for sexual minority children is associated with increased suicidal ideation (Barzilay et al., 2019).

**Progressive Acceptance: Frequent Barriers**

**Politics**

Political differences appear to create more contention within the parent-child dynamic and also appear to impede acceptance. Parent Eta expressed that he has always been conservative and that he and his son frequently experience conflict when engaging in political discussions. However, when his son came out, those political conversations became more heated. He stated that with time he was able to begin to see his son’s point-of-view and the level of tension between the two of them decreased. Parent Nu stated that he and his son also experienced political differences. Parent Nu is a firm Trump supporter while his son is liberal leaning. It is this tension that actually led to his son coming out as gay during an intense political debate. Parent Epsilon also stated that he is a supporter of Trump. He frequently experiences conflict with his son over comments that he has made that his son saw as insensitive. This typically was the result of a political debate. The
experiences of the parents in this study who identify as conservative are qualitatively different from the parents that identify as liberal. The liberal identified parents did not experience politics as a barrier between them and their son, in fact, parent Kappa discusses how her and her son actually reinforce each other’s political beliefs. It appears as though the values and beliefs that exist for conservative parents frequently collide with their son’s gay identity, creating a barrier that both parent and son need to work through.

Support

A lack of support for heterosexual parents of sexual minority children was also expressed by the participants in this study. Parent Iota expressed frustration over not knowing how to have the “sex talk” with his son. When he attempted to find books or literature that described how to have this conversation, he was unable to find any resources. Parent Lambda expressed a large need for anonymous support groups for heterosexual parents of sexual minority children. This is especially true for parents that live in small rural towns where it is difficult to keep conversations about sexuality confidential. Her experience is referenced by the literature. Support is critical as many parents need more time to process their child’s sexual orientation due to fear of rejection by their communities (Diamond et al., 2013; Diamond & Shpigel, 2014). Providing support and creating access to resources should be a main focus for clinicians.

Not Knowing that Their Son is Gay

Another barrier that occurred for heterosexual parents was frustration over not knowing that their child is a sexual minority. Parent Gamma was irritated that she was one of the last people to know her son’s sexual orientation, with her own children knowing before she did. Both parents Lambda and Pi also expressed frustration over not
knowing the orientation of their respective sons. In addition, they were upset that they were the last people to know that their child is a sexual minority. Parent Zeta also expressed frustration. However, she was upset over the fact that she did not “see” it (i.e. recognize that her son is a sexual minority), but all of her other family members were not surprised by the news. Parent Eta also struggled with others knowing before he did. He stated that one of his son’s teachers, who identifies as part of the LGBTQ+ community knew before he did. While he was frustrated initially, with time, he was able to understand and empathize with his son. He was able to see that she was a safe person for his son to come out to. In addition, he understands that his son did not initially tell him due to fear of rejection. Parent Eta acknowledges that his son’s fear ultimately did come to fruition, at least initially. There appears to also be a trend with fathers being more unaware than mothers. Parent Iota reports that his wife knew his son’s sexual orientation before he did. This was true for Parent Epsilon as well. It appears that parents are frustrated with themselves as parents, believing that they should have been able to detect this crucial piece of their child’s identity.

However, in certain instances, the child appears to have intentionally blocked this information from ever reaching their parents. Parent Delta states that he believes that his son intentionally hid his sexual identity from him because he was worried that Parent Delta would see him as weak. Parent Zeta stated that her son dealt with his sexual orientation privately, attending support groups at a local Church. This made it difficult for her to know what was happening. Parent Eta reported that he remembers his son struggling for a period of time while he was in high school. His son slept on their bedroom floor for months. He recalls not knowing what was happening and that his son
would not talk about the issue. This phenomenon has been labeled “shielding” and is supported by the literature. In a study conducted by Timmins, Rimes, and Rahman (2017), the authors found that many children anticipated that their parents would reject them upon coming out. The sons in this study may have hidden their sexual minority status or avoided discussing it for fear that they would be rejected by their parents.

Clinicians should focus on facilitating low stress coming out experiences for their sexual minority clients, especially when disclosing their status to parents.

**Conflating Sexual Orientation and Gender**

A common barrier that occurred for parents within this study was confusing sexual orientation and gender identity. Many parents within this study referred to their child’s mannerisms or dress as something that required time to process so that they could adjust. However, these components of their child’s behavior are related to their gender expression, not their sexual orientation or who their child is attracted to (i.e. parents struggled with gender presentation and mistook it for sexual orientation).

**Miscommunication**

Barriers in communication between parent and child also appear to influence the acceptance process for parents. Parent Alpha explained a misunderstanding that she had with her son that led to conflict. She stated that her son at times preferred to engage in feminine gender expression (i.e. wearing feminine clothes). She discouraged this behavior, not because she was ashamed of his gender expression or identity, but because she was afraid of how he would be received by others. In addition, she was afraid of how other students at his school would treat his siblings if he dressed in feminine attire. Her son became angry and stated that she was not accepting who he is as a person. This kind
of misunderstanding is supported by the literature. What some children saw as rejection, was actually a miscommunication of intent between parent and child, such as trying to help the child fit in (Ryan & Chen-Hayes, 2013).

**Showing Respect**

One phenomenon that was not anticipated by this researcher was the concept of “respect” that was expressed by several parents. There were several components that parents view as displaying appropriate respect. For parent Gamma, following the family’s rules of conduct is a method of showing respect. One rule of conduct is no PDA (Public Displays of Affection). When her son engaged in PDA with his boyfriend at the time, it caused tension in the family. It should be noted that parent Gamma stated that she holds this expectation for all of her children. However, PDA as a sign of disrespect appears in other interviews as well. Father Nu expected his son to not engage in PDA with his boyfriend while in his presence. In addition, he also views gender non-conformity as a sign of disrespect. He acknowledges that his son may bend gender rules in other settings, but that this is not appropriate in front of family. Parent Epsilon also had similar feelings. He believes that his son should follow societal norms and that he should act masculine since he is a man. If he were to act any other way, then it would be considered disrespectful to Parent Epsilon and the rest of the family. In addition, he stated that if someone violates gender norms he will point it out because the individual is intentionally violating societal rules (“when you do something to bring attention to yourself….like that….I'm going to point it out.”, Epsilon, 1601-1602). It is possible that parents are using the concept of respect as a means of covering up their own discomfort with their child’s
sexual minority status. Researchers should further explore the concept of family “rules” and the need to show “respect” in families with sexual minority children.

**Sexual Intercourse**

Thoughts of same-sex sexual intercourse also appear to act as a barrier to acceptance for heterosexual parents. Parent Iota stated that when his son originally came out it was something that he did not like to think about. However, over the course of his son’s coming out experience, Parent Iota had multiple confrontations with members of his community. Many of those confrontations centered around his son’s sex life. Parent Iota eventually realized that his son’s life in the bedroom is not any of his business, nor is it anyone else’s. He utilized this line of logic when confronting neighbors that showed discomfort with his son’s sexual identity. Parent Epsilon had a similar line of logic. He stated that he does not want to think about his heterosexual daughter’s sex life, so why would he want to think about his son’s sex life. He acknowledges that his son has a right to privacy. The concept of privacy and boundaries regarding sexual intercourse was also how Parent Zeta re-framed her view of her son’s sex life. She recognizes that her son has a right to keep certain parts of his life confidential. However, some parents struggled more with the idea of same-sex sexual intercourse. Parent Nu stated that he accepts his son’s identity as a gay man. However, he does not believe that his son should engage in gay sex. It seems that some parents engage in compartmentalization as a means of moving towards acceptance, sectioning off behaviors that they are not comfortable with so that they can still maintain a relationship with their child.

**Fathers Struggle with Acceptance**
In terms of the parents within this study, fathers appear to have a more difficult time accepting their son’s sexual orientation. One common reaction to their son’s sexual minority status was fear that their last name would not pass on. Father Delta expressed disappointment over this loss as he only has one son, so it is likely that his family line will not continue. This was also true for Father Epsilon who values family and the solidarity and unity that it brings. He only has one son and his family name will more than likely not continue.

The husband of Parent Xi had a greater struggle with his son’s sexual minority status than Parent Xi herself. Parent Xi stated that she had to keep the conversation open with him while also balancing his need for time to process his son’s identity. One of his frequent struggles was that by identifying as gay, he feared that his son would change and lose his manhood. This belief took time for him to work through. Compartmentalization occurred again for the husband of Parent Omicron. She stated that while her husband was eventually able to accept his son’s Drag Queen Persona (again, parents struggle with the conflation of gender and sexual identity), he still expected gender conformity while his son was in public. It should be noted that all the sexual minority children in this study identified as gay men. It is possible that fathers struggle more with their sons being sexual minorities as opposed to their daughters.

**Child’s Mental Health**

When the sexual minority child had mental health difficulties, these difficulties appear to complicate the acceptance process. Couple B (Eta & Lambda) discuss how their son has struggled with depression for most of his life. Their son’s coming out process appeared to exacerbate his depression. Eta described how his son spent several months
sleeping on their bedroom floor while he was coming to terms with his sexual orientation. Eta also states that he did not know what was happening with his son. This experience is supported by the literature. In a study conducted by Rosario et al. (2013), the authors found that a less secure attachment mediated the relationship between identifying as a sexual minority and experiencing more depressive symptoms. Future research should focus on the relationship between attachment and depressive symptoms for sexual minority children. Clinicians should also focus on enhancing attachment in families where heterosexual parents are struggling to accept their sexual minority children, especially when their children show signs of depressive symptoms. It should be noted that Couple B (Eta & Lambda) reported a decrease in their son’s depressive symptoms as they came to terms with his sexual identity.

There appears to be a similar relationship between substance abuse and attachment. Parent Xi reported that her son struggled with substance abuse for a period of time during the coming out process. She eventually had to intervene and help him enter recovery. Her son also had a difficult coming out experience that involved rejection from the religious community that is large piece of the family’s core value system. Parent Xi’s experience with struggling to accept her son is reflected in the literature. In a study conducted by Padilla, Crisp, and Rew (2010), the authors found that a positive reaction by the youth’s mother to their sexual orientation served as a protective factor against drug use. When parents struggle to accept their child’s sexual orientation, the child loses a protective factor against drug use. In addition, Parent Xi also noticed a discontinuation in her son’s use of substances once she intervened and moved towards acceptance of his sexual minority status.
Religion is Complicated

This researcher anticipated that religion would act as a barrier to acceptance for heterosexual parents of sexual minority children. However, it appears as though the relationship with religion is more complex. For some parents, religion was not used to condemn sexual orientation, but as a tool and means of supporting their child’s identity. Parent Gamma stated that she received support for her son’s identity when she turned to her religious community. One of the priests in her community stated that their God is loving and that in order to honor God we must love as well. Turning a child away, or ejecting them from the family, does not communicate love ("We have a loving God. That's not--a loving God's not going to turn any of his children away", Gamma 101-102).

Compartmentalizing. Compartmentalizing also appears to occur more frequently for heterosexual parents with strong religious backgrounds. While some of these opposing statements were based in religious beliefs, others centered around the origins of sexual minority identity. For instance, Couple D (Mu & Nu) made comments supporting the idea that being gay is genetic. However, later in their respective interviews they also made statements that were based in social conditioning (i.e. “turned gay”). In addition, a common message that was expressed was “hate the sin, love the sinner”. This message involves a level of compartmentalization because the parent is not attacking the individual as a whole but is instead focusing on one aspect of their identity and expressing dislike for it. This is arguably contradictory as the child’s sexual minority identity is part of their overall personality and ultimately cannot be separated from the child’s persona. Another contradictory thought process that involved compartmentalization was identifying other gay family members while simultaneously
making statements that being gay is something that is caused. This is contradictory as the first statement shows an acknowledgement of a genetic component in regard to being a sexual minority, while the second idea is based in social conditioning.

Couple D (Mu & Nu) expressed acceptance of the fact that their child is a sexual minority while also stating that the family does not discuss his sexual orientation, even with extended family. Cognitively, these parents are expressing acceptance, but their behavior indicates that they may be experiencing a level of shame over their child’s sexual minority identity. The last identifiable instance of compartmentalization addresses their son’s sexual minority friends and the relationship that they have with them. Parent Nu stated that he loves his son’s sexual minority friends and has spent time with them. However, he does not agree with what they do as sexual minorities. This is similar to a previous instance of compartmentalization (“hate the sin, love the sinner”). This statement indicates that Parent Nu accepts his son’s friends as people, but does not accept behavior that is related to their sexual minority status. It is, again, arguable that sexual behavior is part of who they are as sexual minority individuals. The experience of compartmentalizing adds a level of complexity, which may be why parents with religious beliefs need more time to reconcile their child’s sexual identity with their own religious beliefs (Diamond et al., 2013).

**Child Before Religion.** In some instances, parents prioritized their children before their religious beliefs. This appears to be a crucial piece in determining whether or not religious parents moved towards acceptance. When the well-being and mental stability of their child came before their religious values, the parent moved toward acceptance. Parent Xi, who adopted her son, utilized religion to support keeping her son
in her life, regardless of his sexual minority status: "God gave you to us for--you know, we love you! We're not gonna throw you out. We asked for you." (Xi 283-284). Parent Xi also argued that God made her son the way he is, that being gay is part of God’s plan. Other parents also adapted their religious beliefs to make room for their sexual minority child. Parent Pi altered her religious beliefs so that her son’s experience would be honored. Parent Omicron rebutted the comments of unaccepting religious individuals by stating that God does not grant them the authority to pass judgement on others.

**When Religion Became a Barrier.** When parents were not able to restructure their religious beliefs, religion did appear to become a barrier. This was the experience for Couple B (Eta & Lambda), and Couple D (Mu & Nu) who needed time to self-reflect, do research, or consult with others so that they could reconcile their child’s sexual minority status and their own religious beliefs. The current body of literature supports the struggle of religious parents, stating that acceptance is less likely for families that come from religious backgrounds (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993; Schope, 2002; Shpigel, Belsky, & Diamond, 2015). It is possible that that the struggle of religious parents to accept their sexual minority child may be due to the idea that they see their child as a continuation of themselves. This continuation means having certain expectations of their child (i.e. being heterosexual) (Roe, 2017). Indeed, this was the experience for Parent Nu, who believes that his son needs to create life as part of his duty to God. It should be noted that the literature states that the reactions of heterosexual parents with strong religious beliefs typically involve verbal, physical, and emotional abuse, as well as blaming the youth for their sexual orientation and isolating them from the rest of the family (Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009; Szymanski & Gupta,
However, none of the religious parents within this study engaged in these behaviors with their children. This may perhaps highlight belongingness as the difference between those religious parents that reject their sexual minority children and those that do not (i.e. the religious parents in this study do not engage in those behaviors because they want their child to belong in their family). This appears to be supported by the data as Parents Lambda, Xi, and Nu expressed strong family values, stating that protecting and caring for family comes before the sexual identity of each of those members.

In sum, the model of Progressive Acceptance highlights the barriers and the catalysts that parents encounter as they move towards acceptance of their gay son. Parents initially began in a crisis state. During this phase, heterosexual parents are focused to sort through their own emotions and grow to understand what it means to have a son who is gay. These parents then begin the arduous process of returning to their role as a parent, now incorporating their son’s gay identity. Parents then play “catch-up” as they work to understand the experiences their son has had as a gay man, as well as expressing concern for them again (i.e. mental health, how they are handling the coming out process). Once, these parents have worked through their own emotions, and re-defined their relationship with their son, they turn to the community. This is the most contentious phase of progressive acceptance as parents frequently encounter rejection and resistance from friends, family, and religious institutions. Finally, parents come to rest in a place of advanced empathy and awareness. In this stage, they tackle more complicated concepts such as gender, activism, increasing flexibility in their mindset and values, and moving into a heightened state of self-awareness where they recognize work that still needs to be done. Along the way, parents encounter many themes that facilitate the
progression towards acceptance. These themes constitute values, qualities, and behaviors that parents with the capacity for acceptance experience as they come to understand their gay son. Finally, the parents in this study encountered many barriers that need to be worked through in order to experience a heightened level of acceptance. These barriers came in the form of macrosystem beliefs, a lack of knowledge, homophobic attitudes and ideas, and complicating factors not related to sexual orientation. However, the parents in this study continued through these obstacles with drive and determination, making it known that their child will always be higher up on their list of priorities.
Chapter 4: Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore the experiences, beliefs, and qualities of heterosexual parents of gay sons who initially rejected their child and then came to a place of acceptance. Sixteen heterosexual parents were interviewed and fifteen of the interviews were accepted and analyzed. This study was able to uncover the emotional struggles involved in accepting a gay son. Parents discussed initial reactions, reviewed the mistakes that they made, discussed what helped them come to terms with their son’s sexual orientation, and offered suggestions and advice for those parents who are currently going through the same experience. The following details the research questions that were initially posed at the beginning of this study. Each research question is discussed, and the data associated with that particular question is then provided. The model of progressive acceptance that was created in chapter 3 is then reintroduced and utilized to frame the implications this study has for clinicians as well as for future research.

Research Questions

Experiences Associated with Heterosexual Parents Coming to Accept Their Gay Son

One of the initial questions that helped formulate this study addressed the experiences of heterosexual parents of gay sons. This researcher hoped to identify common experiences across the group of participants. There were clear common events that helped these parents change their minds and work to restore their relationship with their son.

Son’s Happiness. One common experience amongst heterosexual parents of gay sons was seeing that their son is happy. This concept can also be readily seen within the literature. In a study conduct by Ben-Ari (1995), the author found that parents who
reported seeing how happy their son was as a gay man, were more accepting of them. Parents Alpha, Gamma, Iota, and Kappa all discussed how seeing their son become happier influenced their acceptance of his sexual identity. In this situation it appears as though their identity as a parent overrode their thoughts and beliefs in regards to their son identifying as a gay man.

**Driven to Connect.** Parents were driven by empathy to connect to their son. Many parents were able to identify experiences of rejection in their own lives (Delta) and felt pain knowing that they had contributed to these feelings of rejection in their own son. This appeared to create cognitive dissonance. The parents in this study then acknowledged that they failed in their role as parents (Zeta) and were eager to return to supporting their son as he grappled with his sexual identity. Empathy was a key emotional experience that all of the parents in this study felt for their son. Parents in this study also acknowledged how necessary it is to engage in self-work (Xi, Lambda, Kappa, Iota, Zeta, Epsilon, Alpha). These parents recognized that they did not have the knowledge or the skill set necessary to understand their son’s experience. These parents then took action, either by educating themselves through books, conversations with allies/members of the LGBTQ+ community, or by attending certain cultural events, such as gay pride.

**Experiences with the Gay Community.** There were also mixed experiences with the gay community for participants within this study. Some parents reported attending gay pride with their son (Gamma & Omicron), while other parents reported that their son was the first gay person that they knew (Lambda). The key commonality in regard to experiences with the gay community was a willingness to come in contact with that
community. Parents within this study described experiences where they met their son’s gay friends (Gamma, Delta, Epsilon, Zeta, Iota, Kappa, Mu, Nu, & Omicron). This particular experience was critical for parents as they were able to confront their misconceptions and stereotypes regarding what it means to identify as a gay man. Several parents walked away from the experience with a sense of humbleness (Delta, Gamma, Epsilon, Iota, Omicron) stating that they realized how wrong they were in their perception of the gay community.

In addition, parents also discussed engagement with their son’s significant other, whether this involved meeting them, inviting them to holidays and other important events, or attending the wedding of their son and their significant other (Parents Gamma, Delta, Epsilon, Eta, Iota, Kappa, & Lambda). Having their son’s significant other present for important family events even occurred for the parents in this study that experienced a greater struggle with coming to accept their gay son (Couple D: Mu & Nu). Some parents even provided a safe space for their son and significant other to socialize when their son’s significant other did not come from an accepting family (Couple C: Iota & Kappa). The relationship with their son’s partner was also key in facilitating the acceptance process. If the relationship was positive, acceptance came more easily (Beta, Epsilon, Eta, Iota, Kappa, Lambda, Xi, & Pi). However, when the relationship was negative or problematic, it acted as a barrier to acceptance (Couple A: Gamma & Delta).

Similar results were seen regarding their son’s gay friend group. Parent Epsilon reported having negative experiences with his son’s friend group initially. When asked what helped him come around to his son’s sexual orientation, he stated that getting to know some of his son’s gay friends was beneficial. He was able to see that the
stereotypes that had been engrained in his youth were inaccurate and that his son’s friends were kind and caring people. Couple A (Gamma & Delta) both reported meeting their son’s friends who participate in a gay choir group. They were able to witness a variety of warm and accepting people and saw that their son was part of a strong support system. They then became involved in supporting the choir and its endeavors. Couple C (Iota & Kappa) regularly see their son’s gay friend group. These friends have invited them to parties or have had them over for drinks on numerous occasions. Both parents reported feeling a sense of warmth and acceptance from these friends. Parent Nu, who struggled significantly with acceptance also reported enjoying his son’s gay friends and has visited with them on numerous occasions while spending time with his son. Parent Omicron’s son participates in drag and she has seen him perform in drag shows on multiple occasions. Through these performances, Parent Omicron was able to meet her son’s friends and see how much support and admiration that he has within the community. All of the parents in this study reported at least some positive interactions with their son’s friend group. In addition, it appears as though meeting their son’s gay friends has a positive impact on the parents themselves, humanizing sexual minorities and helping parents see them as members of their community.

**Stable Parent Sub-System.** The stability of the relationship between the parents of gay men also appeared to be associated with an improved relationship. Couple C (Iota & Kappa) demonstrated awareness not only of themselves, but of their partner’s feelings and thoughts. They were able to empathize and recognize how their partner felt. In addition, there was consistency in communication. When Parent Iota made a comment in their interview, Parent Kappa was likely to make the same comment or have the same
point-of-view and vice versa. Couple A (Gamma & Delta) also both described leaning on each other for support as they processed their son’s sexual identity. Parent Chi stated that she had multiple conversations with her husband. These conversations were helpful because they gave her space to process what she was thinking, and also gave her husband the space to listen and work through his issues at his own pace. She commented in the interview on how well their personalities complement one another. These solid relationships appear to showcase the level of attachment within the family.

Complications. There were also a variety of experiences that parents faced when their son came out as a gay man. These complications were frequently indirectly related to their son’s sexual orientation. Parent Alpha stated that while one of her sons was coming out, he was also being taken advantage of by one of his teachers. She had to not only deal with the news that her son is a gay man, she also had to process the fact that a trusted individual was harming him. Couple B (Eta & Lambda) also experienced complications. Parent Eta identifies as a Baptist Preacher and when his son came out, his congregation turned on him. Parent Lambda describes how the family’s livelihood was put at risk because of the reaction of the congregation to their son’s sexual identity. They lacked tools and resources to process what it means to have a gay son, on top of the fact that the family income was now being threatened. Their community even went so far as to attack their son for the things he wrote in a local newspaper. Couple C (Iota & Kappa) discussed numerous occasions where they not only had to confront community members, but close friends who rejected their son or said unkind things. They even had to be a refuge for their son and his boyfriend because his boyfriend’s family would not allow them to be together. More research needs to assess the extenuating circumstances that are
frequently involved in the coming out process and how they impact the experience of heterosexual parents.

In sum, complications to acceptance included harm to their child from trusted authority figures, conflict with religious communities, and rejection from friends and family. It is also important to note that the amount of time the parents had to process their son’s sexual orientation appeared to have an impact. When parents had more time, they were able to sort through these complications. Parent Alpha was able to sort out her emotions and separate her anger with her son’s teacher from the confusion regarding her son’s sexual orientation. Couple B (Eta & Lambda) were able to confront their congregation (with the help of their son) and find literature that helped them understand their son’s experience. Couple C (Iota & Kappa) eventually made it clear to their community and friends that their son is a gay man and that this is not going to change. They both made the decision to let people sort through their beliefs regarding sexual minorities on their own. In addition, Couple C (Iota & Kappa) were also able to have conversations with their son’s boyfriend’s parents and his parents were able to move to a place of acceptance as well. The idea that parents need time is supported by the literature. One study found that 40% of heterosexual parents within the study became more accepting of their gay son after 1.5 years (Samarova, Shilo, & Diamond, 2013). The researchers discussed several behaviors associated with coming to accept a gay identity. One of the behaviors was displayed by all of the parents within the current study: maintaining contact with their son. The second behavior involved being exposed to gay culture. Parents Gamma, Delta, Epsilon, Zeta, Iota, Kappa, and Omicron, all reported
being involved in gay culture. This occurred in a variety of ways, such as: attending PRIDE events, visiting gay bars, or socializing with their son’s gay friend group.

**Beliefs Associated with Heterosexual Parents Coming to Accept their Gay Son**

In addition to the experiences that the heterosexual parents in this study had, there were also certain beliefs that either accelerated or hindered the acceptance process. When parents had a higher level of self-awareness and were willing to engage in self-work (i.e. research on what it means to be a gay man, talking to experts, having conversations with their son, taking time to reflect on their thoughts and feelings, etc.) acceptance happened more readily. When parents had beliefs that hindered the acceptance process, they needed more time to sort through their feelings and typically experienced a level of distance from their son.

**Son Above Religion.** Interestingly, religion was not automatically a marker for non-acceptance. The determining factor was where their son and their religion fell in terms of priorities. When their son was higher on the list of priorities than religion, parents would re-work their beliefs in order to accommodate their son. When religion was higher on the list of priorities, parents frequently experienced conflict with their son as they expected him to conform to religious values and doctrine.

Placing their son above religious beliefs and doctrine was important for Parent Xi. She re-visited scripture and other religious concepts and found ways to accommodate her gay son. In addition, her re-working of religious beliefs to accommodate her son is also supported by the literature. Nielson (2017), heterosexual parents that were involved in the Church of Latter-Day Saints re-worked their religious beliefs in order to accommodate their gay son. This lends support to the idea that, out of a desire to have their gay son
belong in their family, heterosexual parents were willing to re-organize their belief system.

**Gay Stereotypes.** Many parents within this study grew up with misconceptions of what it means to be a gay man. Parent Pi stated that when she was a child the word “queer” was negative, and no one ever openly spoke about someone who was gay or was believed to be gay. Parent Epsilon discussed how he had an image of gay men as effeminate and flamboyant. He was shocked at what he saw when he walked into a gay bar for the first time, reporting that many of the individuals in the bar displayed a masculine gender expression. The stereotypes purported by the media and other sources appear to create confusion for parents. In one study, parents struggled with the belief that their son was made gay because he was seduced by a gay man. These parents wanted their son to engage in psychotherapy in order to change his sexual orientation (Diamond & Shpigel, 2014). Misinformation and stereotypes appear to be a barrier to acceptance that is supported by research. Future research should focus on how this misinformation impacts the acceptance process.

**Conflating Gender and Sexual Orientation.** A frequent misunderstanding that happened for heterosexual parents of gay men was conflating gender with sexual orientation. Throughout this study many of the parents made comments that they believed dealt with their son’s gay status, when in reality they were commenting on their son’s gender expression. Parent Gamma stated that she frequently saw her son play with dolls and engage in other feminine activities. She mentioned this when discussing how she knew that her son was gay. Parent Epsilon was shocked that his son was gay because he engaged in many masculine activities such as playing football. Parent Eta also shared a
similar experience, stating that his son engaged in activities that you would expect a heterosexual boy to participate in, and that he had a broad collection of friends that were both boys and girls. Parent Omicron discussed how she witnessed her husband push her son to engage in masculine activities, such as football. She stated that her son engaged in these activities to please his father, but she could tell that he was unhappy. She knew, based off of his dislike for these activities, that her son was different. All of these statements confuse gender expression and sexual orientation. While some gay men do have a feminine gender expression, this is not an accurate or assured way to assess an individual’s sexual orientation. A lack of education on the experiences of gay men is a common theme within this study. This conflation is another example of how parents within the study lacked the tools to accurately assess and engage with their son’s gay identity. In a study conducted by Shidlo and Gonsiorek (2017), the authors found that complications can occur when parents confuse their child’s sexual orientation with their gender identity. Clinicians should focus on educating parents on the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity while they come to terms with their child’s sexual identity.

**Origins of Gay Identity.** The cause of a gay identity was also discussed by parents within this study. Most of the parents in the study believed that a gay identity is genetic. Throughout the coming out process these parents came to realize that their son’s identity as a gay man was not their doing. However, several parents did struggle with the idea that a gay identity is not influenced by society or other social conditioning. When Parent Mu discovered that her son was gay, she experienced a state of guilt, believing that she did something or that he had some experience that made him that way. This
belief lingered even when he assured her that he knew he was gay when he was a child. Parent Nu doubted the belief that being a gay man is genetic and reported having multiple debates with his son about the issue. In addition, he was able to draw upon experiences in his life where friends and neighbors “turned gay”. This enhanced his skepticism of the genetic predisposition argument. It appears that when heterosexual parents doubt the genetic argument for sexual orientation, or they believe that it is the result of social conditioning, they encounter more barriers to acceptance. This idea is reflected in the literature. When parents were torn between believing that sexual orientation is genetic versus sexual orientation being a choice, they were less likely to accept their son’s gay identity (Shpigel et al., 2015). This did appear to occur for Couple D (Mu & Nu). These parents also had more obstacles to work through in order to come to a place of acceptance as compared to other parents in this study.

**Qualities Associated with Heterosexual Parents Coming to Accept Their Gay Son**

In addition to the experiences and beliefs held by heterosexual parents, there also appeared to be certain qualities that the parents in this study had that were associated with their level of acceptance. The following qualities appeared to facilitate acceptance for these parents: *empathetic, selfish, emotionally expressive, desiring closeness with their son, being optimistic, having a sense of humor, being compassionate, a level of comfort in discussing gay issues, wanting to understand their son’s experience, having an activist or social justice mindset, being flexible in their beliefs, having a non-judgmental attitude, and being willing to struggle with their feelings* (i.e. emotional tolerance). It appears as though parents who are focused on their son’s well-being have a laid-back approach to
parenting. However, they are also willing to assert themselves, and are able to process difficult emotions.

Role of Attachment in Heterosexual Parents Acceptance of Their Gay Son

The parents in this study expressed a desire to know who their son is as a person and to be involved in their lives. This is the concept of attachment. In addition to the experiences, beliefs, and qualities that appear to be associated with heterosexual parents that move toward acceptance, the level of attachment to their son also appears to be equally important. Throughout this study, the parents that were more aware of their son’s experience in general, not solely their sexual identity, appeared to have an easier time coming to accept their son. For Couple C (Iota & Kappa), they were able to detail their son’s experiences. They discussed his relationship with his peers, the struggles he had in school, the relationships he had with people in the community, his romantic relationships, and were even aware of some of his sexual experiences. This is compared to other parents who felt more in the dark regarding their son’s experience. Parent Mu discussed how her son lives hours away and rarely calls. She does not know much about his experience—sexual identity related or otherwise. Parent Mu even discussed how she was tempted to drive down and see him, just to ensure that he was alright. When parents and their gay son are distant emotionally, it appears as though this distance acts as a barrier to attachment. The literature also supports this idea. Grafsky (2014) found that youth who have higher levels of attachment to their parents are more likely to have increased communication with them and are also more willing to confide in them. A lack of attachment may create a barrier in communication and complicate the acceptance process.
At times throughout this study the participant’s gay son engaged in what this author refers to as “shielding”. In these instances, their son does not report their experience to their parents. While each boy had their own reasons for doing this, the main factor appeared to be a lack of comfort in coming to their parents with certain information. Parent Eta reports that he knew something was happening with his son when he spent months sleeping on their bedroom floor. However, he did not know the struggles his son was going through. Parent Eta discovered that his son was a gay man through his wife who found a love letter that their son had written on the family computer. Parent Zeta also had an inkling that something was happening to her son but did not know what it was specifically. She did not find out until she searched his car and found a love letter. Couple D (Mu & Nu) did not know that their son was a gay man until they were having a heated political debate with him and Parent Nu directly asked his son about his sexual identity. The concept of shielding appears to indicate a lack of attachment between the heterosexual parent and their gay son and should be further examined in future research.

Attachment plays a role in the acceptance process. However, this is not just related to acceptance of a gay identity. If the parent accepts their son’s sexual orientation, then it is likely that this acceptance will be seen in other areas. Parent Zeta reported that she has two sons. One identifies as a gay man and the other identifies as heterosexual. Her son that identifies as heterosexual engages in gender-bending behavior, frequently wearing skirts and other more feminine clothing. She states that he identifies as a “hippie” and is very in-touch with the universe. She stated that by accepting her gay son, it was then easier for her to accept her straight son that bends gender norms. She again re-asserts her philosophy of not caring how someone expresses themselves, as long as they
are a good person. Parent Zeta’s acceptance of both her sons contradicts messages in the literature which state that identifying as a gay man is associated with detachment to parental figures (Pomerantz, Qin, Wang, & Chen, 2009). Parent Zeta’s acceptance is significant and may be a protective factor for her gay son. For example, the authors in Pomerantz et al. (2009) also found that the individuals in their study that experienced detachment with parental figures also had a decrease in self-esteem.

**Role of Belonging in Heterosexual Parents Coming to Accept Their Gay Son**

Heterosexual parents of gay sons appear to facilitate a sense of belonging within the family. The parents within this study worked to ensure that their son felt safe and supported, regardless of their sexual identity. Throughout the study, parents continued to place their son at the top of the list in regard to their priorities. This occurred even in situations where the parent had strong beliefs that contradicted identifying as a gay man. These parents still held their son in high regard and defended their relationship with them. This was the case for parent Nu. Parent Nu has strong religious beliefs, but he stated that he would never disown his son, even if church officials encouraged him to do so.

Parents were also willing to defend their son against others in the community, or even within their own friend group. This was the case for Couple C (Iota & Kappa). They reported several instances with neighbors in their community not condoning their son’s sexual identity. Couple C (Iota & Kappa) had their own individual experiences confronting these members of the community. Neither parent seeks to hide their son’s sexual identity and instead they are open with others about his status as a gay man. If these individuals are uncomfortable or are not accepting, Couple C (Iota & Kappa)
simply let the individual work it out for themselves. They do not tolerate the exclusion of their son. Parent Alpha had an experience of non-acceptance within her own family. Her mother, who has strong religious beliefs, stated that she was not accepting of her two sons’ gay identities. Instead of perpetuating this non-acceptance, Parent Alpha asked her sons if they wanted her to cut her mother (i.e. their grandmother) out of their lives. In this instance, the parent was willing to lose her relationship with her mother just so her sons could have a place within the family. The re-occurring mantra that appeared for the parents in this study was: “they are my son”. It did not matter what beliefs they held, the experiences that they went through, or the thoughts and opinions of others. No matter what happened, these parents were attached to their son. His status as a gay man did not change this fact.

Heterosexual parents of gay men also re-worked their thought process in order to facilitate a sense of belonging for their son. The parents within this study were ready and willing to discuss the positive aspects of their son’s personalities. Parent Alpha referred to her sons as “headstrong mavericks” who were willing to fight for what they believed in. Parent Delta discussed the kind and loving nature his son possessed. Parent Epsilon discussed how his son is always looking to help others. Couple B (Eta & Lambda) both discussed their son’s intelligence and determination and how these qualities are assets for the family. Couple D (Mu & Nu) discussed their son’s dry sense of humor that is an endless source of entertainment. Parent Pi also had a similar compliment for her son who uses dark humor during stressful times in his life. Parent Omicron discussed her son’s social skills and how proud she was of him for the massive friend group that he has built. The parents in this study were not only willing to make space for their son, but they were
also ready to explain why their son is important to them and how that relationship enriches their lives. It is through this practice that these parents were able to acknowledge that their son’s gay identity is just another piece of who they are.

**The Systemic Nature of Acceptance**

The acceptance of a gay son by heterosexual parents is a nuanced and complex topic involving multiple experiences, behaviors, beliefs, and personality traits. Viewing the process systemically allows researchers to understand the bigger picture in terms of coming to acceptance. It also allows clinicians multiple points of entry in terms of facilitating acceptance within a family that is struggling to embrace their gay son. Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Model can help frame how parents were eventually able to move to a place of acceptance (Ormrod, Anderman, & Anderman, 2017).

**Individual System.** The first point of reference in terms of a systemic view of acceptance is to look at the individual themselves. In this case, their son’s own experience of his sexual orientation. When their son struggled to accept their status as a gay man, the acceptance process became complicated. For parents Couple B (Eta & Lambda), this occurred when their son slept on their bedroom floor for a period of several months. Couple C (Iota & Kappa) discussed needing to intervene with their son in terms of his risky sexual relationships with other men. For parent Xi, she had to intervene in her son’s substance abuse which he was using to cope with his sexual identity. These experiences complicated the acceptance process for parents as they had to contend with more than just their son’s gay identity. Conversely, when their son expressed confidence in who they are, parents were more willing to stand aside and let their son express themselves. This was the case for parent Alpha, who expressed a level of pride for her
son who is in the military. She stated that he is confident in his identity and is not afraid to argue for his own rights or the civil rights of other populations. His dedication to his identity made it easier for her to accept him.

**Microsystems.** Much of the resistance to their son’s identity as a gay man took place at the microsystem level. It is in this system that the child comes into contact with the important figures in their life. This includes parents, the community, and their peer group. In addition, the church culture that their son was involved in also played an important role for some families. The majority of this study has focused on the experience of the heterosexual parents. The emotions that the parent feels and their ability to cope with those emotions was of paramount importance in terms of the acceptance process. Many parents reported feeling shame, fear, and embarrassment as their son came out as a gay man. Their ability to process and cope with these emotions (frequently done through humor and optimism), had a profound impact on the parent’s level of acceptance. In addition, the parents in this study were well acquainted with empathy. Even though Parent Iota identifies as straight, he worked to relate to his son’s experiences growing up (i.e. being confused by sexual impulses, recognizing that both he and his son struggled in school). This empathy allowed parent Iota to engage in healthy conversations with his son, as opposed to reacting in anger. The parent’s ability to manage their emotions and endure discomfort appeared to have an impact on the acceptance process.

The family system either slowed the acceptance process or acted as a catalyst for acceptance. In the case of parent Alpha, her mother was an obstacle that had to be navigated. This was true as well for Couple A (Gamma & Delta) who had to host multiple holiday gatherings due to the fact that non-accepting family members would not
invite sexual minorities into their home. Parent Epsilon discussed rage with his extended family when they did not attend the wedding of his son and his son’s husband. Parent Zeta was frustrated with her 2nd husband as he would frequently make derogatory remarks about her gay son. Parent Lambda and Parent Kappa both discussed having brothers that would make lewd or inappropriate “gay jokes” or other comments at family gatherings. Couple D (Mu & Nu) discussed their extended families and the fact that no one openly discusses their son’s sexual identity. Parent Xi discussed how she was incredibly disappointed with her sister who rejected her son based on religious doctrine. Family and their beliefs were frequently the first obstacle that the parents in this study had to overcome.

Similar to the family dynamic, the response of the community either helped or hindered the acceptance process. Parent Epsilon discussed how the community he currently resides in is less judgmental, especially when it comes to individuals being sexual minorities. He has seen frequent friendships between gay and straight people which was something that he never saw when he was growing up. Parent Zeta discussed how she was slightly frustrated because many of the people in her community already knew that her son was gay. Couple C (Iota & Kappa) have seen a drastic change in their neighborhood community as time has progressed and there has been more visibility for sexual minorities. However, they both remember needing to defend their son against homonegativity in the past.

Religion was also a large piece of the acceptance process for many of the parents in this study. Couple A (Gamma & Delta) discussed how their religious community was accepting. They were surprised by this, but even had priests and other members of the
HETEROSEXUAL PARENTS THAT MOVE TOWARD ACCEPTANCE

church show their support for a continued relationship between Couple A (Gamma & Delta) and their gay son. Couple B (Eta & Lambda) had a very difficult time with their small-town church which also impacted the response of their community. When their son came out as a gay man, many members of their church tried to get Parent Eta fired as their pastor. This happened again when their son married his husband. Parent Xi had to assert herself on multiple occasions in her church environment. Similar to parents Couple C (Iota & Kappa), parent Xi refused to let anyone erase her son’s identity. She openly stated that he is gay and would defend him against the attacks of other members. In addition, she reported experiencing some conflict with the church pastor.

**Macrosystems.** The values and beliefs of society also weighed heavily upon parents as they navigated the acceptance process. Religion and religious doctrine were a major value that parents frequently had to contend with. Parent Mu discussed how she came to a disagreement with Parent Nu over attending their son’s wedding. This was due to a message that came from a priest stating that if you attend the wedding of a gay man, then you are condoning their identity. Parent Lambda had a similar experience with religion. She recalls being told that gay people are “wicked” and sinful and that they should be prayed for and avoided. She remembers regretting an experience where she told a child in her Sunday school class (who’s aunt identified as a lesbian) that her aunt needed to fix herself. Parent Xi had multiple rejection experiences with members of her church (and still has these experiences on occasion) as she attempted to bring together religious values and sexual identity.

Parent Epsilon discussed working through stereotypes as part of the acceptance process. Growing up, Parent Epsilon was given messages that illustrated gay men as
being effeminate and weak. This was in addition to the belief that gay people were to be avoided. Friendships between gay and straight people were a fantasy and not something to be sought out. He remembers his first experience attending a gay bar with his son. He stated that he saw many people there that he would have believed to be straight if he had seen them in a different setting. He was able to recognize that masculinity is still possible for gay men. In addition, his son’s friend group has shown him that friendships between gay and heterosexual people are possible. One of his son’s best friends is heterosexual and they have been friends since childhood. Parent Pi also had a similar experience in terms of avoiding sexual minorities. She recalled growing up and hearing the word “queer” thrown around in a derogatory way when referring to sexual minorities. She stated that being gay was not something that was ever acknowledged. Parent Gamma discussed receiving messages in the medical community from her pediatrician. This particular doctor made it seem as though one could “train” a child to be heterosexual. She remembers following his recommendations until she realized that they simply had no effect. She has since then come to the realization that being gay is simply a piece of her son’s personality.

**Chronosystem.** Perhaps the most obvious system involved with coming to a place of acceptance is the chronosystem, or changes that simply occur as a result of time passing. Parents in this study referred to time in several different ways. Some parents such as Epsilon and Pi referred to the time period. They made statements that illustrated how, in the past, being gay was not something that was widely discussed, and people would be heavily criticized if they came out. Parent Lambda had a similar experience
with a close friend and family member who she believed to be gay. However, due to the
time period, it was not safe for him to come out.

Parents also referred to age as an aspect of time. Parent Gamma stated that she
noticed that her other children had an easier time with her son’s coming out process than
she did. This same experience occurred for Parent Pi who stated that her daughter knew
that her son was gay man a long time ago. His sexual identity did not impact her
daughter’s relationship with her son. Even in situations where siblings struggled to come
to acceptance, age and peer group did seem to help facilitate the coming out process. This
was the case for Parent Omicron who stated that her heterosexual son did struggle when
her gay son came out. However, her heterosexual son’s girlfriend helped him come to a
place of acceptance. Her heterosexual son is now comfortable going into gay bars and
communicating with sexual minorities. He also came around much quicker to her gay
son’s sexual identity than her husband.

The most commonly discussed aspect of time was that it takes time to come to a
place of acceptance. Every parent interviewed in this study stated that they needed time
to understand. This experience is also supported by the literature, which states that many
parents come to a place of acceptance after approximately 1.5 years (Samarova et al.,
2013). In reviewing the categories and sub-categories in this study, the amount of
processing needed to come to terms with a sexual minority status is very clear. Parents
need to sort through their own initial reactions and emotions. They then need to re-work
their values and beliefs in addition to engaging in education on what it means to be a gay
man. Once they have sorted through their own internal experience, they must then
contend with their community. This means working through the reactions of their friends,
family, and workplace while also dispelling common stereotypes that are purported by society. It is understandable that this process would take time.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations within this study that need to be acknowledged. First, the interpretations of this researcher are subjective and a function of his own experience and bias. In order to assuage this bias, the researcher recruited three co-coders. During the data analysis process the researcher coded every line of each transcript. In addition, one of the three co-coders also coded those same lines. The research team then worked toward coder agreement between the primary researcher’s code and the coding of the co-coder. This led to the creation of a finalized open code that was less likely to contain the primary researcher’s biases.

Apart from this researcher’s biases, there are other limitations to consider. One major limitation of this study is that all of the children of the participants involved identified as gay men (i.e., male). In addition, all of the participants identified as white. While this study does not have the quantitative power to represent a population of people, care should be taken when interpreting and applying the results of this study. It is possible that sexual minority women have a very different experience from what was found within this study. In addition, all of the coders and the researcher himself are highly educated. This level of education could also create a bias that impacts the interpretation of the data. Future research should work to incorporate a more diverse participant pool. In addition, incorporating coders and researchers from varying levels of education may create a more comprehensive picture of the process that led heterosexual parents to accept their gay son.
Another limitation to this study was discovered upon review of the original theory selected to guide this study. It appears as though attachment theory may have been more loosely connected to the acceptance process than had originally been determined at the onset of this study. Attachment theory is not totally absent from this study, and there are instances where attachment and a desire to have their son remain in their lives was very apparent (i.e., mother magic). However, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems model appears to be a more accurate fit for the results discovered in this study. For example, Bronfenbrenner’s model quickly captures the main areas of struggle that occur for parents moving through the acceptance process. The internal reaction of the parent to the news that their son is a gay man would be part of the individual system in terms of the acceptance process. The reactions of family members, the neighborhood, and the church would all represent microsystems in the family’s immediate community. The interactions between these microsystems would then constitute the mesosystem which focuses on how each microsystem impacts the other (i.e., the impact of the church on the family’s neighborhood in the case of a religious community). The macrosystem or the overarching societal beliefs about gay men is addressed in the second stage of the model of progressive acceptance. It is here that parents consult literature and experts to help them combat the stigma and stereotypes purported by society (i.e., macrosystem beliefs). Finally, the chronosystem highlights how acceptance as a process changes over time. This study has highlighted how the current research on the coming out experience for sexual minorities is outdated. This study has found an association between acceptance and time. When more time has passed, acceptance appears to be more likely (i.e., passage of time is a chronosystem variable).
Review of the Model of Progressive Acceptance

The model of progressive acceptance discussed in chapter three is a tool that can be utilized to help clinicians and researchers (see Figure 1 in Appendix D). Clinically, the model can help mental health practitioners know where parents are in terms of their acceptance journey. These practitioners can then enact interventions appropriate for the phase and stage that the parents are currently in. In terms of research, this model can help guide research, creating different entry points of examination in the acceptance process (e.g., crisis phase, rebuilding phase). The following section details how the model of progressive acceptance can be utilized to help clinicians and researchers engage with families who are struggling to accept their gay son, as well as create new more effective methods of assessment and treatment.

Theory of Progressive Acceptance: Implications for Counselors

There are several considerations for future counselors that should be considered when working with heterosexual parents of gay men who are struggling to accept their son. One major area of focus should be to enhance the parent’s level of self-awareness. Self-awareness is a critical part of the advanced empathy and awareness stage. However, encouraging self-awareness earlier in the process may act as a catalyst for acceptance. Throughout this study, parents expressed many ideas and beliefs that they later came to regret. Parent Lambda regretted telling one of her Sunday School students that her aunt who identified as a lesbian needed to fix herself. She came to realize the damage that many of her comments had on her son and the people around her. However, she did not have a frame of reference to work within, or people giving her feedback. Once she grew in understanding and self-awareness, the damaging messages discontinued. Parent
Lambda is not unique in her experience. Many of the parents in this study commented on how they simply did not know how they were being perceived. Parent Alpha admits that there were times where she was trying to communicate one thing to her son, and he heard another.

The lack of self-awareness may stem from a lack of resources available to these parents. This deficit is highlighted within the metamorphosis stage where parents spend time learning about what it means to be a sexual minority. Providing more resources, or, in the case of rural communities, more access to confidential resources, may enhance the level of acceptance for parents who are struggling. Many of the parents in the study stated that they simply did not have the resources to be able to ask questions and get answers regarding their son’s status as a gay man. This was especially true for Couple B (Eta & Lambda) who live in a small town. In addition, reaching out for help is difficult as many parents experienced judgment. This was the case for Parent Xi who experienced judgment in her church and rejection from other family members. In fact, there was so little support for parents struggling with the acceptance process, Parent Xi became a resource for other heterosexual parents. She has communicated to her pastor and others in her church that if they need a safe place to talk about these issues, then they are welcome to come to her. Increasing access to resources and education should be a focus for counselors who are trying to help parents come to terms with their son’s gay identity. In session, counselors should work to provide validation, normalization, and empathy as many parents experience shame while processing their son’s gay identity.

The role of family connectedness cannot be understated. In the Facing the Community Stage parents had to contend with the thoughts and opinions of others in their
community. Counselors need to be aware of this lack of connectedness and the contention that exists within families, surrounding sexual identity. Family therapy should be utilized when needed and family members should be given the space to vent their concerns while having a mental health professional confront inaccurate beliefs. This lack of acceptance may have come from experiences in their past, from religion, or from misinformation. However, even in the most conservative or religious backgrounds, families found a way to accept. Parent Nu discussed how in his family love was openly expressed at all points in time. Both he and parent Mu wanted this for their son and worked to make ensure that openly expressing affection for one another was a family value. The importance of family appeared to act as a buffer against rejection of their son. Parent Nu stated that he would never reject his son, no matter what a religious official said, as his son is part of their family. It appears as though family connectedness and attachment may even ward off the impact of political differences on the acceptance process. This appears to be especially true for the parental sub-system itself. When both parents are aware of the other’s feelings and thoughts, then there appeared to be less barriers to communication which facilitated the acceptance process. In addition, they were more willing to engage in dialogue with one another and, as a result, process their feelings more frequently. This was true for Couple A (Gamma & Delta), Parent Epsilon and his wife, Couple C (Iota & Kappa), and Parent Xi and her husband. Counselors and therapists should work to build stronger cohesion within a family that is struggling to accept their son.

Counselors should also anticipate several obstacles in the acceptance process. First, they should expect to see some level of frustration from parents for not “noticing” that their son is a gay son. This phenomenon needs further research. However, it appears
as though many parents see it as a failing on their part. They were not able to see that their own son was a gay man, but other people were. This was the experience for Parent Zeta and Parent Xi. Counselors should also be aware that mothers may move more quickly through the crisis phase than fathers, and that they tend to facilitate the acceptance process. Mothers do this by pushing their husbands to re-work their values, while simultaneously asking their son to be patient while their father sorts through his feelings. Counselors should focus on the dynamic between mother and son and growing the mother’s sense of acceptance, especially after she has moved through the emotional chaos phase, during which time she has a diminished capacity to empathize with her son. When the mother has moved into a more secure state of acceptance, it is possible she will start to facilitate this process for other family members. In regard to fathers, counselors should be aware that fathers appear to take a longer time to move through the crisis phase and reach acceptance. Fathers appear to have an exceptionally difficult struggle with the belief that their son will lose his manhood upon identifying as a gay man.

Parents Epsilon, Zeta, and Iota identified another potential complication, sexual intercourse. These parents struggled with the thought of their son engaging in same-sex sexual intercourse. However, they were able to come to a place of acceptance through processing their feelings (i.e., recovery experiences in the emotional chaos stage). These parents came to the realization that they did not want to know about their heterosexual children’s sex lives either. They were able to recognize that some aspects of their son’s life are private and they do not need to be involved in those matters. Counselors should present a similar line of logic to parents that are struggling with the concept of same-sex sexual intercourse.
Another obstacle to acceptance is a rigid religious belief system. Throughout this study, religion has been a complicated variable. This is due to the fact that it does not always indicate that rejection is imminent. This can be seen in the case of Parent Xi who actually utilized religion as a tool to support her gay son upon reaching the advanced empathy and awareness stage in her acceptance journey. The key focus for counselors should be where religion and religious beliefs fall in the list of priorities for parents. If religion is a lower priority than their son, then it appears as though there is less risk for rejection. When their son’s well-being ranked higher than religious beliefs, these parents utilized religion to support their son’s identity. However, when religion is higher than their son on their list of priorities, then it appears as though parents expect their son to conform to their religious beliefs. Counselors should be aware of this dynamic and work to help heterosexual parents identify their values as well as enhance the level of attachment between parent and son.

There are two final considerations for counselors working with heterosexual parents who are struggling to accept their gay son. First, counselors should work to normalize the feelings that parents have when their son initially comes out. This is an especially powerful tactic when parents are in the emotional chaos stage and are struggling to manage these negative emotions. Anger, embarrassment, disappointment, and many other feelings are difficult for parents to manage. By providing validation and normalization for these parents, the counselor is helping them build emotional tolerance. Emotional tolerance appears to be necessary for parents as they make their way through the acceptance process. Parents with higher levels of emotional tolerance appear to be more likely to stay on track with acceptance as opposed to becoming frustrated and
rejecting their son. Parents, such as parent Epsilon, were able to experience these emotions with a sense of humor and humility while also being able to understand that they have self-work that they need to engage in. Emotional tolerance appears to be the fuel that helps parents move through the acceptance process. Second, the level of attachment between parent and son is of vital importance and is a focus of the *return to parenting stage*. When a parent has a higher level of attachment to their son, they appear to experience higher levels of acceptance in other areas of their children’s lives. Parent Zeta stated that coming to accept her gay son made it easier to accept the personality quirks of her heterosexual son. Solid attachment appears to facilitate greater levels of acceptance, and higher levels of acceptance appear to be associated with a stronger attachment between parent and son.

**Theory of Progressive Acceptance: Special Considerations for Family Therapists**

Therapists should also consider the benefits of engaging the family in family therapy. The Model of Progressive Acceptance highlights how multi-faceted the acceptance process is. For example, in the first stage of coming to accept their heterosexual son, the parent must first work through their emotions surrounding the fact that their son is a gay man. This means that parents may have many emotional reactions that indicate a grieving process, not rejection. In this phase of the acceptance process, the family therapist can help the family’s son better understand their parents’ reaction as one that is born out of grief and loss, not rejection.

In the second stage of the acceptance process, *metamorphosis* parents are focused on trying to understand what it means to be a sexual minority. Mourning the loss of the heterosexual future is a main part of this stage. Family therapists should work to ensure
that family’s son knows that this mourning period is normal and that it will take time for
their parents to reconstruct the image that they have for their child’s future. In addition,
family therapists should be well-prepared with resources for these parents who are
struggling to accept their child (e.g., books, support groups, supportive professionals,
personal therapy referrals). In the metamorphosis stage, parents look for answers to their
questions, but are frequently unaware of the resources that are available to them. Family
therapists should make an effort to guide parents toward appropriate material during this
stage.

In the third stage, parents focus on returning to parenting. This means that they
spend time understanding their son’s struggle and coming to understand multiple parts of
his life that they have not been present for (i.e., romantic relationships). During this
phase, family therapists can expect conflict as the parents and son renegotiate their
relationship. Parents may hear painful stories of rejection that their son has experienced,
or their son may feel resentment towards their parents attempting to intervene or “parent”
them due to having already established a method to working through discrimination and
or sexual orientation based issues. Family therapist should encourage the family to focus
on the process that is occurring (i.e., renegotiating relationships) and the therapist should
re-frame this as moving towards a place of peace and understanding and away from the
emotional chaos that is the first part of the coming out process.

In the fourth stage, parents and son must navigate the relationships that exist
outside of the family. This could include community organizations such as the church, or
may even involve extended family members. The family must navigate who and when to
discuss their son’s sexual orientation. This phase is particularly difficult for both parent
and child as they have no control over the reaction or behavior of other members of the community. The family therapist should focus on helping the family come to an agreement regarding how they will disclose their son’s sexual orientation and to whom they will disclose it. In addition, the family therapist should help all members of the family work through potential rejection experiences that could occur when a community member discovers their son’s sexual orientation. Similar to parents Iota and Kappa within this study, family therapists should help parents solidify their views on what it means to be gay and help the family create a unified front when dealing with other family members or members of the community.

The final stage of acceptance involves more advanced skills, such as increased empathy and awareness. During this phase of their journey, parents are accepting of their children, but are also still growing in their understanding of matters related to sexual orientation (i.e., the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity). In addition, they are also entering a place of self-awareness where they reflect on their journey towards acceptance. In this stage, family therapists should be knowledgeable on the issues facing the LBGTQ+ community and also be able to provide answers to the questions parents have regarding the community. In addition, the family therapist should focus on providing general emotional support (i.e., normalizing and validating) as many parents experience shame and embarrassment when they review their initial reactions to their son’s sexual orientation.

**Theory of Progressive Acceptance: Recommendations for Future Research**

There are several areas for future researchers to examine as a result of this study. First, researchers should take a deeper look into the idea of “respect”. This concept
appeared for several parents in this study who communicated that acts of PDA between their son and their romantic partner were disrespectful. The same use of the word “respect” can also be seen when parents expected their son to conform to gender as a means of showing “respect” to the family. The idea of showing “respect” appeared when parents were in the facing the community stage and appears to stem from some level of embarrassment. Further research is needed to understand how these parents define “respect”. Another source for future research comes out of a question that was frequently posed to this researcher: “do these same categories and sub-categories hold true for gender minorities?” This researcher intentionally did not include gender minorities in this study. This is due to the fact that this researcher believes that gender minorities have a qualitatively different experience in receiving acceptance from their parents as opposed to sexual minorities (i.e., gay men). The experience of gender minorities should be further examined and compared to the acceptance experience for sexual minorities.

Researchers should apply the theory of progressive acceptance to the process engaged in by cisgender parents of transgender children to see if the tenants within the theory hold true to this population and detail the path of progressive acceptance.

The participants in this study all came from middle-class to upper-middle class backgrounds. One potential research question to consider is: “do these codes and categories hold true for families from low-income backgrounds?” It is possible that parenting style changes in these backgrounds and therefore so too would the attachment style. This idea is supported in the literature. Ormrod, Anderman, and Anderman (2017) states that for most family systems, an authoritative method of parenting is appropriate for raising children as it facilitates a sense of autonomy in the child. This helps the child
feel more confident in their decisions in the future. However, in low-income environments, the researchers found that having a more authoritarian style of parenting is necessary. This is due to the fact that low-income areas tend to be less safe and therefore parents need more obedience from their children. An authoritarian parenting style creates a hierarchy where the child is subordinate to the parent and is expected to follow directives. While this parenting style does help keep the child safe, it may also impact the ability of the parent to form an attachment with their son. If the level of attachment is impacted, then it is possible that the parents’ capacity for accepting a gay son will also be impacted.

Another key limitation related to demographics is the racial and ethnic composition of the participants. In this study, all participants identified as white. This is an important limitation to note as the experiences in families that identify as racial and ethnic minorities may be qualitatively different from the participants in this study. Future research should focus on recruiting racial and ethnic minorities and examining their experience of acceptance to determine whether the theory of progressive acceptance can span the racial divide.

Finally, future researchers should explore the impact of attachment-based interventions on the level of acceptance experienced by heterosexual parents of gay men. This research could enhance the parents’ level of connection with their son in the return to parenting stage, acting as a catalyst for increased acceptance. In a study conducted by Muzik et al. (2015), researchers examined the impact of the attachment-based program “Mom Power” which worked to improve the parenting capability of mothers. The researchers found that when the mothers attended the majority of the sessions, their
parenting capabilities did improve. Researchers should examine whether or not programs such as this can improve attachment and then, consequently, also improve the level of acceptance for a gay son. Additionally, the association between the personality type of the parent and their level of attachment to their gay son should be examined. Specifically, researchers should examine if more Type A personalities are less likely to attach and therefore, more likely to struggle in accepting their gay son as compared to Type B personalities.

**Conclusion**

The goal of this study was to ascertain the experiences, beliefs, and qualities that led heterosexual parents of gay men to a place of acceptance. These parents undergo a major transformation as they work to incorporate their gay son back into their lives. The parents within this study completed a variety of tasks in order to come to this place. First, they processed their initial emotions upon their son’s coming out (i.e., *emotional chaos stage*). For some parents this meant taking time to think about what it means to have a gay son. For other parents this meant engagement in self-work through the use of books, media, or having conversations with trusted individuals (i.e., *metamorphosis stage*). Some parents also needed to take a closer look at their own childhood experiences and identify incorrect ideas and beliefs that they had carried on into their adult lives. Once parents have returned to a state of stability, they recognized their absence from their child’s life and re-engaged with them. However, this time, they addressed and acknowledged their son’s identity as a gay man (i.e., *return to parenting stage*). Once these parents re-defined their relationship with their gay son, they had to contend with the community (i.e., *facing the community stage*). This meant defending their son from
homophobic family members and confronting friends that held discriminatory beliefs about sexual minorities. Finally, parents were able to move deeper into a higher level of understanding, addressing more complex topics such as gender and re-working harmful religious beliefs. In addition, at this point in their acceptance journey, parents began to engage in activism for their son (i.e., advanced empathy and awareness). The determination and dedication displayed by these parents as they worked through the obstacles and difficulties that are involved in the progressive acceptance process showcase the priorities of these parents, with their love for their son being the utmost priority.
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Appendix A

Participant Invitation

Hello,

My name is Brady Sullivan and I am a doctoral student in Counselor Education at the University of Missouri – St. Louis. I am currently recruiting participants for my dissertation in order to examine *Heterosexual Parents Who Move Toward Acceptance of Their Sexual Minority Children.*

If you are a *heterosexual* parent of a *sexual minority child, and you initially struggled with your child’s sexual orientation but have moved towards a place of acceptance—I would like to hear from you.*

Acceptance for this study is defined as any behavior that is a step towards understanding your child’s sexual minority status (e.g. attending LGBTQ+ events or festivals, reconnecting with your child if you were estranged, asking your child about their romantic life when you would not have done so in the past, etc.). If you do not qualify for this study, *feel free to forward this message on to anyone who would qualify.*

Participation consists of a semi-structured interview that will last approximately 2 hours. Interviews can be done in person, or at a distance utilizing Zoom® conferencing software. In addition, participants may be asked to answer follow-up questions. All participants will receive a $20.00 Amazon gift card for their time. All information will be kept confidential and pseudonyms will be utilized to protect anonymity. The goal of this research is to identify common themes in parents who move towards acceptance. The identification of common themes will help improve the methods utilized by practitioners who are working with families that are struggling to accept their sexual minority children. Results of this study will be utilized for the primary researcher’s dissertation and subsequent publications.

If you or someone you know would like to participate, please contact me at: bradysullivan@umsl.edu Participation is completely voluntary and participants may withdraw at any time. Please feel free to also contact me with any questions that you may have. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Susan Kashubeck-West at kashubeckwests@msx.umsl.edu This study has been approved by the University of Missouri’s Institutional Review Board, IRB Log #1473286-1.

Thank you for your time,

Brady

*this study will focus on sexual minorities as the research indicates that gender minorities and sexual minorities have different coming out experiences with their parents. A separate study will need to be conducted for gender minorities.*
Informed Consent

Heterosexual Parents Who Move Towards Acceptance of Their Sexual Minority Children

Participant

HSC Approval Number 1473286-1

Principal Investigator Brady Sullivan, MA, LPC, NCC

PI’s Phone Number 630-885-8663

Summary of the Study

The following is a research project that examines the experiences of heterosexual parents of sexual minority children. This is a qualitative research project and participation is voluntary. The purpose of this research is to understand the process that leads some heterosexual parents who initially have rejected their sexual minority children but moved to a place of acceptance. Participation in this study should last approximately 1-2 hours and may require follow-up phone calls to clarify data. The participant will engage in a recorded interview with this researcher. There are no foreseeable risks. However, there may be some discomfort in answering interview questions. There are no immediate and direct benefits of participating in this study; however, this work will add to the body of literature on the families of sexual minority individuals.  

1. You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Brady Sullivan under the supervision of Dr. Susan Kashubeck-West. The purpose of this research is to better understand the processes that lead some heterosexual parents who initially rejected their sexual minority children to a place of acceptance.

2. a) Your participation will involve
   - Participating in a 1-2 hour interview with Brady Sullivan that will be recorded
Approximately 30 individuals may be involved in this research at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

b) The amount of time involved in your participation will be 1-2 hours (and you will receive an Amazon gift card for $20.00 for your time).

3. There are no anticipated risks associated with this research. However, it is possible that thinking about your relationship with your sexual minority child and how it has changed over time might cause some feelings to come up. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. In addition, we will provide you with a list of resources at the end of your interview.

4. There are no direct benefits for you participating in this study, other than the gift card.

5. The main findings of this study will be made available to you upon request.

6. Your participation is voluntary and you may choose not to participate in this research study or to withdraw your consent at any time. You will NOT be penalized in any way should you choose not to participate or withdraw.

7. We will do everything we can to protect your privacy. As part of this effort, your identity will not be revealed in any publication that may result from this study. In rare instances, a researcher's study must undergo an audit or program evaluation by an oversight agency (such as the Office for Human Research Protection) that would lead to disclosure of your data as well as any other information collected by the researcher. That oversight agency must keep your data confidential.

8. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, or if any problems arise, you may contact the Investigator, (Brady Sullivan 630-885-8663) or the Faculty Advisor, (Dr. Susan Kashubeck-West, susankw@umsl.edu). You may also ask questions or state concerns regarding your rights as a research participant to the Office of Research, at 516-5897.

   I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I will also be given a copy of this consent form for my records. I hereby consent to my participation in the research described above.

Participant's Signature ___________________________ Date ________________

Signature of Investigator or Designee ______________________ Date ________________
Appendix C

Interview Protocol

- **Demographics.** Participants will be asked to state general demographic information. This will include: age, gender, ethnicity, and the sexual orientation of their child.
  
  o How old was your child when they came out?

- **Semi-Structured Interview Questions.**
  1. *Tell me how you experienced your child’s coming out process.* (grand tour)
  2. *What emotions do you remember feeling when your child came out? Have those emotions changed? How so? What may have led to this change?* (emotion)
  3. *Describe your experiences with sexual minority individuals. Have you had contact with sexual minority culture? Did any of these experiences help you become more accepting? (i.e., attended PRIDE; participated in PFLAG; gone to rallies, marches, vigils or memorials)?* (community engagement/experience)
  4. *Describe your relationship with your child. What are aspects that you enjoy as well as what are some areas for growth?* (attachment)
  5. *Describe your relationship with your own parents growing up. In what ways is your relationship with your child similar? In what ways is it different?* (attachment)
6. How well does your child fit in with your family/family values? (belong)

7. Who does your child discuss sexual orientation issues with? Who are they close to? (belong)

8. How has your child adapted to being a sexual minority (i.e., struggled to accept themselves)? (parental concern for well-being)

9. How have the people in your life reacted to your child’s sexual orientation? (experiences)

10. Are there any particular beliefs that stand out to you as being the biggest obstacle that you had to work through in order to become more accepting of your child (i.e. religion)? (beliefs)

11. What helped you become more accepting of your sexual minority child after they came out (i.e., processes, behaviors, beliefs, other people, etc.)? (move towards acceptance)

12. Describe your child’s gender expression (i.e., if your child identifies as male, do they participate in typical male gender expression? Or do they exhibit more feminine qualities?). Did your child’s gender expression make it easier, or more difficult to accept their sexual orientation? (gender conflation)

13. Are there any other experiences that helped you come to accept your child as a sexual minority that were not captured in this interview? (move towards acceptance)
Appendix D

Model of Progressive Acceptance

FIGURE 1: THEORY OF PROGRESSIVE ACCEPTANCE

EMOTIONAL CHAOS
- Initial emotions
- Working through initial emotions

METAMORPHOSIS
- Seeking new information
- Mourning the heterosexual image
- Connecting to son’s social support system

RETURN TO PARENTING
- Witnessing son
- Identifying son’s struggle (sexual orientation or not)

FACING THE COMMUNITY
- Religious reactions
- Friend/family reactions

Advanced Empathy and Awareness
- Addressing gender
- Activism
- Lacking judgment
- Increased flexibility
- Appreciating their own struggle
## Appendix E

### Code Book

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category 1: Emotions</th>
<th>Property</th>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Supporting Text</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. <strong>Initial Emotional Reactions Experienced Upon Coming out</strong></td>
<td>a) Fear</td>
<td>Absent to Present</td>
<td>I think I was afraid. I was afraid for him. I was afraid for us. I was afraid for how he would be able to cope with and deal with this, and I was afraid for the potential of him contracting HIV/AIDS, and I was still afraid for how we would be viewed as parents by friends in our community. (Iota 101-104)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>b) Shock</td>
<td>Absent to Present</td>
<td>We'd play ball, he played football. He was good at what he did. You know, I didn't have any thought until that day, and then you know, it's like somebody throwing water in your face. Ok, what's going on here? (Epsilon 85-88)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>c) Denial</td>
<td>Absent to Present</td>
<td>I always had that thought in my mind. You know? Because he never dated; he was always with guys. So….</td>
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you know? But you know in the back of your mind... you just kind of ignore it, you know, thinking: "Nah, that ain't it." (Mu 7-9)

d) Empathy
Absent to Present
I can’t imagine people who didn’t have their parents’ support (Pi 30-31)

e) Embarrassment
Absent to Present
"Well do you ask your daughter about her sex life?" "Oh hell no!" I said: "I don't ask my son either"....and it's like.... it’s like a fucking light bulb goes on in these people and they start thinking: "oh". So that's my standard line nowadays (Epsilon 556-562)

f) Sadness
Absent to Present
I don't know, at first, I felt nauseated. You know? Just like--because I had some bouts of depression myself. Different times, even before that, and this sure didn't help that any at the time. I'm not saying if I was justified in that. I'm just telling you how initially it hit me you know? Almost like--I don't know how to put things in words very good--but almost like a death in the family, only,
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<td><strong>g) Anger</strong></td>
<td><strong>Absent to Present</strong></td>
<td>He was a freshman in college and told me on the phone. I seriously wanted to die. I always knew he acted different from his brother and tried to ignore it all his life. His father was very angry and thought he went away to college and turned gay. (Omicron 4-6)</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>h) Overwhelmed</strong></td>
<td><strong>Absent to Present</strong></td>
<td>I....thank God that I wasn't working cause I really thought I would drive into one of those medians…. because I just couldn't deal with it. So I'm being very honest, I couldn't deal with it I could not.... during the 6 weeks that he was gone I did a lot of thinking…. (Zeta 31-45)</td>
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<td><strong>i) Guilt</strong></td>
<td><strong>Absent to Present</strong></td>
<td>I regret every bit of it. I wrote him a 5-page letter. I don't know if he told you that. Oh, I wrote him a 5 page letter sent it to him. &quot;I gave birth to a son to get married and give</td>
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me grandkids not to....blah blah blah blah". Five pages of just....I regret that (laughs) and this has been so many years ago. You know? I mean he's 40 now and that was when he was 17, and I, to this day, still regret that. (Zeta 345-364)

2. Recovery Experiences

| a) Selflessness | Absent to Present | When my mom was really bad in my house, like talking about this stuff and I was like I'm not--I'm not doing this. Like I will cut my mother (laughs) out and I will be with my son and I gave him a choice. I was like: "listen if you want me to....do this and take this stand.... (Alpha 329-332)

<p>| b) Parental subsystem | Unhealthy to Healthy | I think my husband was a little angry because as a father--I think it's harder when you have a son. It’s kind of like--I know (husband) thought our son was losing his manhood and it took him awhile for him and (son) to be able to, you know, be comfortable again with each other (Xi 64-67). |</p>
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<th>c) Attachment</th>
<th>Detached to Fused</th>
<th>Well and we are a smaller town so my son wanted to put the rainbow flag on his car and I'm like &quot;you can be who you are, and you can do this, but then you need to be aware of your surroundings&quot;. You know? You don't want to be a target you have to have situational awareness....and then of course “my mom is anti-gay” anti-anything so that was hard too (Alpha 169-173)</th>
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<tr>
<td>d) Expressing affection</td>
<td>Not Expressed to Expressed</td>
<td>He was every parent's dream. He went to Boy's State, Washington D.C., competed and won the record for Speech Trophies and I started the Speech and Drama Boosters for him as a freshman. He named one of our elementary schools with an essay contest, and he did everything I suggested. He made me so proud to be his mother! (Omicron 85-88).</td>
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<tr>
<td>e) Desiring closeness</td>
<td>Not Desired to Desired</td>
<td>So, but there was a, there was a Mother’s Day, and it’s been I don't know 5, 6 years ago</td>
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something like that--my Mother's Day card was not the normal beautiful card he gets me, and it had a letter in it that I wasn't--he said he was stepping back from the family and I didn't really know what that meant. Until we were down here at the lake and sees all of his family but me. I mean they would go right down through here with the pontoon....and not even look at me. So New Year's Eve that year....New Year's Eve I sent him an email and I said: "ok, we're starting a new year. Is this how it's going to be? This is crazy." You know? and he'd come back with--it was not a real nice email and stuff but, he kind of--not mean, hateful "I hate you, you're...." this kind of stuff and finally I said: "why don't we get together?" Just him and I, and we met one night after work, at Friendly's--I don't know if you've heard him talk about Friendly's--stayed there till....shit I didn't get home till 2 o'clock in the morning. I
had to get up and go to work the next day, because it was a work night. We talked a lot, so we did that. Couple times we would meet, just him and I and then (husband) come back, and (brother). (Zeta 517-529)

f) Optimism Absent to Present
If you love somebody, you love somebody, and I'm happy for you. Because, we only get a short period of time on this planet and achieving that is probably one of the greatest things you can do for yourself....Is having the ability to love and be loved. (Iota 984-986)

g) Humor Absent to Present
You know it’s funny because I wasn't sure if I could get away and when I finally decided....I kind of wanted to throw it as a surprise to him. You know? I think he was more shocked that I came out with him than anything, and I think that helped a lot, otherwise--how many gay guys does it take to put in a lightbulb? Just tell me that, right now (Epsilon 465-469)
he would call with questions like: "is this--" I don't know how to say it so....he can recognize like microaggressions, and he'll call me and we would process those and we would just talk through them, like "yes this is wrong, what you're seeing is real" like "that was not ok" and maybe he's come to more....self-confidence in addressing these alone? We haven't really had those conversations in a while, but he used to come and say like: "I don't get it. I don't get it. What are these people doing? These heterosexuals....they're dumbasses" (Alpha 677-683)

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<tr>
<th>Category 2: Parent's Journey</th>
<th>Property</th>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Supporting Text</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Knowledge</td>
<td>a) Gay stereotypes</td>
<td>Not Endorsed to Endorsed</td>
<td>A lot of the misconceptions I think are that gay men are promiscuous and, you know, well.... I don't know, I went to college and (laughing), I saw some pretty promiscuous women and men, you know, so that label doesn't fit. (Kappa 103-106)</td>
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<td><strong>b) Misinformation</strong></td>
<td>Absent to Present</td>
<td>Some people it's a choice they make but... he said he knew when he was a teenager or whatever that he was gay so... to me that has to be something that was inside of him that he was born with. Then you blame yourself, you know: &quot;Is this something I did wrong?&quot; (Mu 65-68).</td>
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<td><strong>c) Awareness of gay issues</strong></td>
<td>Absent to Present</td>
<td>But he told me... oh, it's been a while back. He said: &quot;Mom, I don't think you're going to realize this but... I knew I was gay when I was 3 or 4&quot; and he said: &quot;I know. I should have talked to you about it&quot; and I said: &quot;Well, I kind of seen it coming&quot;. He said: &quot;Well why didn't you say something?&quot; I go: &quot;Well it's not for me to say that, to call you that. I think that's something you need to say to me.&quot; (Xi 162-166)</td>
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<td><strong>d) Resources</strong></td>
<td>Absent to Present</td>
<td>if there had been like a support group that was online that I could have accessed anonymously... you know? That might have been helpful. Instead of going through that</td>
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because when you're out in the sticks, like we are, when nobody talks about anything and they just whisper and gossip. That would've been nice just to have somebody that had already been through it, and lived through it, just to know, you know? To give me some pointers, you know? (Lambda 864-869)

e) Awareness of son’s experience

"Mom, thanks for saving me" he said, "because I think I would've done more" and you know, he was with somebody.... his best buddy. You know? People would come to the door. Guy tried to hurt her and (son), being small, he just jumped on this guy (laughs) and I'm like: "(Son) you could've been killed" he said: "I know Mom. I did that. He left." and I'm like: "What did he do?" (laughs) But he struggled with all of that. He didn't know how we knew, but (son)'s an open book. That's all I can say. (laughs) (Xi 951-957)
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<tr>
<td>f) Sharing learned knowledge</td>
<td>Does Not Share to Shares</td>
<td>I mean I know there was an adjustment period. You know just getting used to it and...but you know, after that when we jumped right in....that was it. It was like all or nothing jumping in. Once we jumped in it's like taking, as a parent, taking that first....jump off the diving board I guess. (Gamma 842-845)</td>
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<td>2. Loss of Heterosexual Fantasy</td>
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<td>a) Marriage</td>
<td>Not Desired to Desired</td>
<td>like &quot;oh you know people in the LGBTQ they don't have relationships that last. They're going to get a divorce. It's not going to be stable.&quot; and then I started thinking about it like &quot;oh well because heterosexual marriages are so stable&quot; (Alpha 69-71)</td>
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<td>b) Grandchildren</td>
<td>Not Desired to Desired</td>
<td>It's just like.... we don't have any grandkids. My other son is married and it's like: &quot;Maybe (son) could produce grandkids?&quot; You know? Something that--and I believe that's what God created us for, for life. To bring life into the world--that's how you got here. (Nu 69-72)</td>
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3. **Self-Work**

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<td>a) Self-education</td>
<td>Absent to Present</td>
<td>Then I started reading the other side of the story on my own research instead of just everything that came out of the Southern Baptist</td>
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<td>c) Carrying on last name</td>
<td>Not Desired to Desired</td>
<td>Certainly, I would be wrong if I didn't say I felt disappointment....and--Oh! I know why I was telling you this about the family! The disappointing thing, as my wife mentioned, is that.... you know....there was only one....I only had one brother in my siblings. He has had two girls.....and I had one boy, and my other sisters each had one girl. There was no one in our family line to carry on the name. (Delta 119-123)</td>
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<td>d) Career expectations for their son</td>
<td>Expectations Not Met to Expectations met</td>
<td>beginning even in young high school days, he was preaching himself and in our-Southern Baptist is what I am--and, in our denomination, you know, we don't ordain homosexuals and....I'm not even saying--well I think there was a time that was his plan too. (Eta 32-35).</td>
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mouth....and you know, stuff that it could be genetics. I know (son) sent me something one time that the 2nd sons a lot of times are the gay ones and I thought: "Well that's not right because I had a miscarriage before (son)"
Then I thought: "Well that would make him the 2nd son" you know? (Lambda 708-713)

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<th>b) Reaching out for support</th>
<th>Not Sought to Sought</th>
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| he did have somebody he kept referring to who I've gotten to know now better named (mentor's name) who's a physician, a pediatrician for (hospital). I think (mentor) is getting close to retirement now--if he hasn't already retired. But (mentor) is an interesting guy. And I think that's where (son) got a lot of his support--at least initially, was through the people in the chorus....and (mentor) was particularly helpful, because he's a physician, and (mentor) kept telling him: "This is not abnormal. This is a natural thing." You know, "You don't have a choice, this is...
something that you were--was bound to happen" (Eta 780-795)

c) Self-Awareness  Absent to Present  
Researcher: What was the hardest part about (son) being gay? Like if you could sum that up what was the hardest part?

Participant: (scoffs) selfishness. Me, and what people would think about me. That's selfishness. "What are people going to think about me?" (Zeta 123-138)

d) Self-Care  Absent to Present  
Participant: I can't stand a liar and I will shut you out of my life that fast. I'd just turn you off. Unfortunately, I have that ability to say: "I'm done" and I'm done. Don't ever call me again, don't try to contact me, don't--I'm done

Researcher: It's definitely a skill that I don't like to use but--
Participant: I've used it. I've had to use it, because I had to do it to get certain people away from me. Not good
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<th>4. <strong>Parent Past</strong></th>
<th>a) Experience with gay individuals</th>
<th>Negative to Positive</th>
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| *(husband)* had written an article back when the kids were little, before he went to seminary. They were like 2nd and 5th grade, and before we went to seminary he was preaching in a little country church and somebody had written an article in a Presbyterian magazine and he put a big thing in there, you know, like stomped in hell with a water pistol and, you know, "Well gays are wrong and they're going to have to get their act together or they're going to Hell" and all this stuff and then we found out that one of the boys in our church was gay, and his partner or something got *(husband)*'s number and was calling us and harassing us. That was....a lot of the context that we had of a gay person. Somebody from the dark, shady side and they, you know....calling and harassing us and--"I know where you live, and I know...
where your kids are”, you know. Bizarre stuff. So....so.....our thoughts are in bizzarro world, not in the real world. (Lambda 178-193)

| 5. Parent Present | a) Current political beliefs | Unaccepting to Accepting | The politics, the politics is rough, especially now. Especially with my other son (son's brother) you know? (Son's brother) is Trump, you know? And I am too, you know, I mean....I don't like his approach, but I think we have some other bad things out there that need to be addressed. So we don't bring that up, you know? (Nu 309-312) |
| b) Coming out complications | Absent to Present | so he had a drama teacher who----I'd always wondered about the relationship because he was a little too close to my son, like texting him, and calling him, and like Facebooking him. Like it was ridiculous. So, when my son came out he was super angry and the way he said it was super angry like he was just like: "mom I'm a flaming homo" (laughter) and my |
teacher….and so I kind of got hit by a lot of sides with it, you know? So, you know I don't want my son victimized. I don’t want teachers you know—so much of that was part of that process for me (Alpha 41-52)

c) Relationship to important people in son’s life | Negative to Positive | So I said: "I'll get up and talk" you know? and so I said how-cause everybody always says: "how do you tell them apart? They're both named (son and husband's name), blah, blah, blah". So that's when I said: "well the way I tell them apart, there's my (son) and then there's my favorite (son’s partner)". (Kappa 136-139)

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<th>Category 3: Son’s Journey</th>
<th>Property</th>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Supporting Text</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Son’s Identity</td>
<td>a) Compassion</td>
<td>Absent to Present</td>
<td>I'm not doing this, like I will cut my mother (laughs) out and I will be with my son and I gave him a choice. I was like: &quot;listen if you want me to....do this and take this stand....&quot; and he was so compassionate he was like: &quot;I don't....I don't want you to do</td>
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that". He goes: "Grandma is who she is. She's old, she's not going to live here long. I don't want her gone from the family. I get that she doesn't like anybody who isn't just like her....and I'm willing to accept that." So, I mean he was pretty compassionate and accepting (Alpha 330-336).

| b) Assertiveness | Low to High | Our savior in that was (son). Who had more sense than all of our stupid Church members and came with his little book of "Robert's Rules of Orders" and came home from college to be at that business meeting and he called all these people that hadn't been to Church that said they were good friends forever and ever, and rallied the support and we were not fired (Lambda 244-249) |
| c) Self-acceptance | Absent to Present | basically he went from crying to….he was dreading what was coming. The reactions of others. Now he doesn’t care what people think. He’s morphed into that “I am who I am, and if you don’t like it---

### 2. Son’s Experience

| A) Support system | Weak to Strong | (son) took me out to gay bars and called me up to the center of the room because he was manager of this bar. Everyone in the audience thanked me for supporting my son. This happened in at least 3 different settings. Everyone loved (son) and he was always greeted as a celebrity when we were out. (Omicron 65-68) |
| b) Son’s coming out experience | Difficult to Easy | So it's kind of, you know, I can't really remember it being rough. He hung out with 3 guys who were all motorheads in community college and the one guy was a--his father was one of the police chiefs in our town. I think the one time when he said: "I'm gay" that was like the only friend that I knew that responded with: "that's disgusting" and left him. (Kappa 380-384) |
| c) Involvement with family | Reclusive to Engaged | We see him daily. I do projects with him all the time. |
Household projects, he comes through he does things. He used to be a regular almost every Sunday before the pandemic hit—he and his husband. We're close, and that's the one thing I had in conversation that I had with his partner's father. You might get to this point too, he and his wife were... not so good about the relationship developing, because I think they were in difficulty in trying to accept their own son's homosexuality. That he was "different", but I told (son) from the very beginning, I said—and I told his father, you know, this man is (son’s husband)'s dad. I said: "I don't know what kind of relationship you want with your son, but I know the relationship I want with my son is not to change from what it already was. So the fact that he's gay, the fact that he's in love with your son is not even a... it's not even on the plate for me.” (Iota 256-266)
| d) Shielding | Absent to Present | Especially with this pandemic stuff. It's been really hard on him and he don't say much. You know, he won't talk to us. He texts us, you know? And I wanted to talk to him. I don't know how many times I thought of getting in the car and going to (son’s city) just to see (slaps hands) if he was ok. You know? I wish he would communicate more (Mu 150-153) |
| e) Mental health | Absent to Present | I think he struggled a whole lot, at first. Like I said, a lot of it was even before I knew what was going on, but he went through a spell there when he was...in high school, where he was scared of—what, we didn't know. He slept on our bedroom floor for.... quite a while. Not like years, but months probably. Not every night but a lot of times. Then he has depression anyway and I think this definitely made that worse. Honestly, he probably still struggles with it, but he's got a pretty good grip on it I think now, but I'm sure there's parts |
of it he doesn’t understand either. (Eta 726-733)

f) Relationship with siblings  Negative to Positive  I mean brothers don’t care. I mean brothers tease them. You know like yeah the way that they joke around each other. Like say the third boy. He'll be like: "Oh my God, you're gay" but it's so disrespectful and rude (laughter) and I'm sitting here as a mom going like: "don't say that" but that's just how they joke and it's ok. I don't know. (Alpha 577-581)

**Category 4: External Forces**

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<th>Subcategory</th>
<th>Property</th>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Supporting Text</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Community</td>
<td>a) Religious rejection</td>
<td>Absent to Present</td>
<td>I think he had said one or two things kind of like we took the wrong way and basically let him have it with both barrels that: “hey, this is my son, this is the guy that idolized you. The young man that idolized you. You can make a choice as to which way---whatever way you want to deal with it and it's not me dealing with it. You have to either accept it or don't accept it. But nothing about him has</td>
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changed. He is the same person. It's just that he may love differently than you know how to love." (Iota 612-618)

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<tr>
<th>b) Community setting</th>
<th>Rural to Urban</th>
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<td>I mean everybody knows everybody's business, and that's part of the problem at that time. I'm sure a lot of people knew it before I did--besides these friends, you know? People probably picked up on things that I wasn't even thinking about. (Eta 821-824)</td>
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<tr>
<th>c) Political stance</th>
<th>Conservative to Liberal</th>
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<td>So we actually came across a sign that was posted in front of my chiropractor's office and spoke with her about it. It begins with: &quot;I believe....I believe that Black Lives Matter. I believe that love is love. I believe life of water&quot; or something--&quot;life is water. I believe in--&quot; a few other things I can't recall exactly but, it's a series of little statements and my wife (wife) contacted the chiropractor to find where it was, where she had received</td>
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it. She got it online. She subsequently ordered 10 signs and we posted one in front of our house. One of our neighbors who we've known since the time we moved into this community came to us and wanted to know where we got it and we gave her one. (Iota 328-339)

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<th>d) Workplace</th>
<th>Unaccepting to Accepting</th>
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<td>Researcher: Were there any big beliefs or things, obstacles that were in your way that prevented you from kind of coming to terms with (son) being gay. Like anything that you can really identify--</td>
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| Participant: It was probably my job. My career. My job. I definitely did not.... bring it forward to those around me other than one trooper that I worked with who's still the only trooper contact that I still retain a relationship with, him and his family. They certainly knew about (son), this fellow Ron,
he and I served together in various assignments and they were well aware of it. (Iota 999-1007)

| e) Community awareness | Lack of Knowledge to Knowledge | Oh we told her! and she didn’t handle it, but I mean she just denies it. Like it’s just a non-issue. I don't know if you were familiar with that story "Prayers for Bobby". I had my second son sit with her one day and watch that show and at the end of it she just came to me and said: "Oh (Participant) you are nothing like that".... that wasn't for me. (Alpha 186-202) |

| 2. Religion | a) Religious beliefs | Negative to Positive | she never said anything mean, but very Bible thumping: "and the Bible says, and the bible says" and I don't know the Bible well enough, but I also hear people say: "uh-huh, uh-huh" cause there's--I guess in the Bible there were some gay people? They don't seem to remember those people (laughs) (Zeta 1098-1105) |
b) Church reaction

Absent to Present

Well and he struggled with our pastor. Our pastor, he seemed like he was going to help us with that, you know? Being more comfortable, how to approach it. He actually.... upset (son) because, you know, they tried to get him to go to this camp where they.... convert you, and....he was scared! Because he brought another Church member that we knew and they came to his apartment, and they asked if they could come in and talk to him. He said: "yeah" and man.... the guy that came with our Pastor was just like, he could pray you out of that. So they were just really, really.... you know....didn't have any compassion. (Son) after that, barely would go to Church. (Xi 109-120)

c) Religious flexibility

Rigid to Flexible

We were watching EWTN one night and they had a caller call in and ask, said that their son was gay and was going to get married and asked the priest if they should go to the wedding. Well, of course, the priest said: "No,
cause if you go to the wedding, you're condoning what they're doing". So, (husband) said: "See! I told you! I told you!" Well, I'm still going to go. You know, it may be my sin too but.... that’s my kid. I can't not support him. (Mu 462-467)

<p>| 3. <strong>Time</strong> | a) <strong>Time period</strong> | Past to Present | Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! I mean.... you know....his inner circle of friends....straight, gay, it doesn't matter and honestly that, I see that, that wouldn't of happened back when I was younger. Just the way you were raised, you know, you stayed away from gay because it was going to rub off. (Epsilon 505-516) |
| | b) <strong>Memory loss</strong> | Forgotten to Remembered | No....I think he was out of school then. I think he was out of college, but like we didn't do stuff.... or didn't know any of his friends at the beginning, and he like....or maybe this was when he still lived at home but he had already told us (Gamma 637-643) |</p>
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<th>c) Age</th>
<th>Old to Young</th>
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<td>I don't think it was that big an adjustment for his siblings as it was for me. Just because I was so shocked, you know? Just never--just never really...I don't know, never came up, never crossed my mind. You know? and I think them being younger they probably accepted it a lot easier than I did and probably already thought: &quot;yeah, that makes sense&quot; you know? (Beta 287-294)</td>
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<tr>
<th>d) Acceptance occurrence</th>
<th>Slowly to Immediately</th>
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<td>About how he would be looked upon and how difficult life can be for someone in the workforce....jobs, socially amongst our own community, and friends that we have or have had at that time. I think that was the big fear factor of that. Plus, the uncertainty of having grown up, gone through the 80s and the AIDS issues. I was very, very concerned about the possibility of sexual transmission, AIDS, HIV. In a nutshell that's about where I came to at that point. I slowly</td>
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graduated to where we are now. (Iota 34-40)

| Category 5: Adaptability | 1. Gender | a) Non-conformity | Rejection to Acceptance | Participant: He always showed other signs that he was gay and tried so hard to fit in the traditional lifestyle we expected, even so much as signing up to play football in Jr. High, but realized he hated contact sports and skipped practice after practice until the coach called to check on him. This was a big red flag.

Researcher: So it seems like another vehicle is the fact that he wasn’t fitting into traditional roles in the way that you would expect him to?

Participant: Correct. He only signed up for football to attempt to get his father's approval... My heart broke for him. (Omicron 46-55)

b) Family impact | Minor to Major | Participant: Yeah....on his birth certificate he's a male. He's a male, and he should--even though he's got those
differences—should present himself as a male. Now, what I don't know (laughs), you know what I'm saying? I mean I'm not quite sure. I just—“don't come around, you know, wearing a dress” or....yeah. If you get what I'm saying yeah.

Researcher: Right. Right. So, it would have made things harder--

Participant: Yes, very difficult

Researcher: and yeah that's because, again, like this is--like you said: "birth certificate, it says male, and you should present that way"

Participant: present that way, yes. Now what you do elsewhere--as long as I don't know, yeah, that's your business.

Researcher: Right. Ok, yeah. So that makes sense. So it's again, it kind of comes back to that respect idea that you're talking about like: "when
you're around me, when you're around the family"--
Participant: That's correct. It's respect! (Nu 576-595)
c) Conflation  
Absent to Present  
Probably why it was such a shock to me at the time because he did like to do boy stuff, you know? He didn't sit around playing with dolls--he may have some with his sister but, we lived in the country then too growing up. He just had his sister to play with, we didn't have any other kids real close, but I don't think he was--you know, he had bb guns and everything else that normal boys have. So that probably did make it more of a shock to me because he acted like a little boy. (Eta 1085-1090)

2. Openness  
a) Comfort  
Absent to Present  
I know that.... he said the other day: "Yeah, well I just don't act that way around you" and I said "I appreciate that" (laughs), but I don't. You know, if that is a flaw, I probably still have it. I don't know. (Epsilon 1557-1559)
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<tr>
<th>b) Desire to understand</th>
<th>Absent to Present</th>
<th>We've always had conversations with our son. When I discovered that I needed to educate myself, my wife also, we would talk! We would talk about (inaudible). I'd like to think that we represented an open--I'd like to think we had an open door on the subject. (Iota 804-813)</th>
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<td>c) Activism and advocacy</td>
<td>Absent to Present</td>
<td>I mean I've donated to like garden state equality and....&quot;It Gets Better Project&quot;, I usually make a yearly donation to them. There was a book one time that &quot;It Gets Better&quot; they published, and you could purchase a book for your high school. So, I did that a number of years ago so that there was a book like that up at the library at my son's high school. (Kappa 171-175)</td>
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<td>d) Judgment</td>
<td>Absent to Present</td>
<td>We, you know, we don't judge and there's only one person that's going to judge us in life....and that's when we're gone. (Epsilon 1434-1435)</td>
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<td><strong>e) Flexibility</strong></td>
<td><strong>Absent to Present</strong></td>
<td>yeah I think that has helped probably seen her--like I said for years and she's a very very dedicated teacher and goes above and beyond, she does the yearbook and stuff like that. Very supportive, not only in-school, but out of school with the kids....and she probably has a little sense of that too that she really has to go above and beyond to prove herself because she probably knows how people--some people think about her. (Delta 440-445)</td>
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<td><strong>f) Embracing the struggle</strong></td>
<td><strong>Not Embraced to Embraced</strong></td>
<td>I....thank God that I wasn't working because I really thought I would drive into one of those medians, because I just couldn't deal with it. So, I'm being very honest, I couldn't deal with it. I could not....during the 6 weeks that he was gone I did a lot of thinking....and I said to myself: &quot;What I do behind closed doors is my business. What he does behind closed doors is his business&quot;, as long as he's a good person. That's all that matters. So that’s</td>
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when--how I came around and accepted it. (Zeta 31-50)