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Significant others' experiences of the coming out process of a lesbian individual

Dissertation presented by

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Significant others' experiences of the coming out process of a lesbian individual

Abstract of the study

This study aims to explore and describe the experiences of significant others during the coming out process of two lesbian individuals. The study gathered more detail regarding how various individuals experience the coming out process in the hope of contributing to the theoretical base of literature concerning lesbian studies in South Africa. The literature review provides a survey of the coming out process as well as a discussion regarding significant others (family and friends). Some factors and experiences involved in the coming out process are also discussed. The qualitative case study is approached from the interpretive paradigm and systems theory was utilised as a theoretical framework throughout the study. Data was generated primarily through unstructured interactive/in-depth interviews and secondarily through stories, field texts, photographs and a research diary. Six individuals participated in the research study, the two lesbian individuals and four significant others as identified by them - two mothers, a father and a close friend. The data analysis led to both commonalities in experiences and unique experiences identified by participants. The results of the study indicated that some form of suspicion or awareness was present in the significant others before the act of disclosure; emotional reactions from involved participants can be placed in a continuum ranging from positive to negative and the act of disclosure was viewed and experienced as both a crisis and as progressive by different participants. Various factors could influence the experience of the coming out process for significant others as well as the reactions to the act of disclosure. However more research is needed to investigate what these factors might be. Participants also mentioned various stages towards acceptance (individuals fall in a continuum and can move forward and backward). Both common and unique experiences were present and can assist others in understanding the coming out process from different perspectives.

Key words:

- Coming out
- Lesbian
- Significant others
- Experience
- Disclosure
- Sexual orientation
- Reactions
- Emotions
- System
- Acceptance

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DEGREE AND PROJECT	MEd: Educational Psychology Significant others' experiences of the coming out process of a lesbian individual	
INVESTIGATOR(S)	Ms R Lotter	
DEPARTMENT	Department of Educational Psychology	
DATE CONSIDERED	06 December 2010	
DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE	APPROVED	

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction and Rationale

In this research study I explored the experiences of significant others throughout the coming out process of a lesbian individual. The understanding of various experiences may lead to better negotiation, understanding and support of significant others in such circumstances and a better understanding of the system within which gay/lesbian individuals[1] navigate their lives in the 21st century. South Africa is characterised by the progressive legislation upholding the rights of gay/lesbian individuals, and the discrimination and hate crimes against them (Roberts and Reddy, 2008). However there is still room for growth.

Instead of forcing individuals to conform to a stereotype brought forward by society it would be better and beneficial to seek understanding through exploring the experiences and developmental process around the coming out process. I explored the systemic effects within the friend and family relationships of the gay/lesbian individual. There are many questions that are raised in research (Crosbie-Burnett, Foster, Murray, & Bowen, 1996) such as:

- What is the impact of the quality of the parent-child relationship on the process of coming out? What is the impact of coming out on the parent- child relationship?
- What is the impact on a marriage when a child comes out? Is it different in a remarriage?
- What is the impact on the sibling subsystem when a brother or sister comes out?

From these suggested research questions one can gather that there is still much room for growth in the exploration of systemic effects within the coming out process.

This research study was conducted and viewed within a systemic framework. As an Educational Psychologist I strive towards moving away from the conceptualization of a family as abnormal toward viewing families as a whole in a continuum of functioning. Morrow states (2001) that coming out to their families is a major milestone event for many gay/lesbian people and that intervention can be an important support for gay/lesbian people and their families who are navigating the coming out process. By exploring the experiences of significant others and viewing research from a systemic framework, appropriate contributions to the theoretical base, which informs such interventions, was made.

Two years after finishing high school several friends of mine came out and disclosed that they were gay/lesbian. I had not had any idea that they were hiding their sexual orientation. I felt saddened by the fact that they had to withhold this information from me and others about their identity because they feared rejection. Each individual had received various reactions to their declaration, but they all reported feeling relieved and thankful that they could be themselves once coming out.

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[1] I acknowledge that the appropriateness of this term remains contextual. As I am working within a South African context I have chosen this term. The definition as well as interchangeable terms will be provided later.

Plummer (1995) states that for lesbians and gay men in the 1970s and 1980s coming out was a pivotal 're-birthing experience', but states further that it may be changing in the 1990s. I am contemplating whether the changes that have occurred over the past decade have in turn changed the manner in which significant others experience the coming out process.

Literature shows that in response to the process of coming out, families could undergo a process of destabilization that could be detrimental or uplifting to the family relationships. The family could progress from a level of awareness of the individual's sexual orientation, to coming to terms with this realisation and adjusting to it (Carr, 2006). Throughout this journey to acceptance the experiences of family members and other individuals have received selective attention in research, but their stories and experiences form an integral part of the puzzle. This is why I chose to focus this research study on the systemic effects of the coming out process and in particular the experience of significant others.

Although studies have been conducted on the reactions and adjustment of family and friends to the coming out process, most have been done in a fragmented fashion separating the reactions of parents and friends (Graziano, 2004; Merighi & Grimes, 2000; Patterson, 2000; Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998; Stotzer, 2009). Many of these studies have also been completed overseas and not in a contemporary South African context. South African literature on lesbian women as a research population is however lacking. Although the South African literature base has grown, this research study will contribute to that knowledge base as it will explore the systemic experiences of the coming out process within the progressive context of a contemporary South Africa.

1.2 Statement of Purpose

The purpose of my study was to explore and describe the experiences of significant others during the coming out process of a lesbian individual. In the hope to contribute to the theoretical base of literature concerning lesbian studies in South Africa, the study gathered more detail regarding how various individuals experience the coming out process. The concept significant others is explored further in Chapter 2, but may include friends and family members identified by the lesbian individual.

1.3 Research Questions

1.3.1 Primary Research Question

The primary research question which guided the study:
How do significant others experience the coming out process of a lesbian individual?

1.3.2 Secondary Research Questions

The following secondary research questions were considered during the study:

- *How does the lesbian individual experience her own coming out process?*
- *How does a family member experience the coming out process of a lesbian individual?*
- *How does a peer experience the coming out process of a friend?*

1.4 Concept Clarification

Throughout various studies the following terms have been used in different contexts. However for the purpose of this study the following definitions will be adopted:

1.4.1 Significant Others

Significant others can be seen as the important people in an individual's life with whom she shares a bond and who holds a special place in her life. These individuals, identified by the lesbian individual, can be regarded as the individuals who played (or are playing) a role in the gay/lesbian individuals coming out process and they include friends and family.

Coming out first to oneself and then to others can be seen as the two phases of the coming out process (Anhalt & Morris, 1998; Chirrey, 2003). Questions now arise as to who these *others* are, what they mean to the individual, and how do they experience the coming out process? These *others* are the significant others that I have included in my study.

Family is defined by Say and Kowalewski (1998:5-6 as cited in Morrow, 2001: 54) as "a committed relationship, developed over time, between persons who participate in each others' lives emotionally, spiritually, and materially". Families may include a variety of members. Brooks (2008) also emphasises that all family members are affected by the stressful life event of one family member. It is the shared bond, participation in each others' lives and the systematic effect on all the individuals within a group which may not only identify them as family but also as significant others within the gay or lesbian individuals' life as the definitions above may be expanded to include friends as well.

1.4.2 The Coming out Process

Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter and Warren (2009) and Floyd and Bakeman (2006) view the coming out process as the sexual identity development of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. This process can be viewed in a variety of forms which are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

Savin-Williams (1990:30 as cited in Anhalt & Morris, 1998:218) defines coming out to oneself as "a process during which a number of milestone events occur whereby an individual moves from non-recognition of her homosexuality *[sic],* with perhaps a degree of sensitization of being somehow different from others, to self-recognition that she is indeed a homosexual [sic] person". Anhalt and Morris (1998) view the coming out process in two stages. (1) Coming out to oneself and (2) coming out to others. They add also that coming out to others involves an individual's disclosure of a gay or lesbian sexual orientation to people in her life (e.g. peers and family).

The coming out process can be regarded as the journey taken by an individual in which she recognises her own sexual identity privately and thereafter discloses this to significant others in her life. It also occurs as an ongoing process in the lives of lesbian and gay people in that the social environment presents ever-changing situations in which gay and lesbian people must decide on a daily basis the degree to which they will disclose their sexual orientation (Morrow, 2001). The terms coming out and disclosure are also utilised interchangeably at times. In this research study I have chosen to use them interchangeably as well.

1.4.3 Gay/Lesbian Individuals

I have chosen the term gay/lesbian individuals to use in my research study. I have also chosen it since it indicates how the participants in the study refer to themselves. The participants referred to themselves as gay at times and at other times as lesbian and therefore the terms gay/lesbian was utilised, without reference to any specific gender. Other research studies have used other terms interchangeably to describe this group of individuals such as homosexuals, different sexually orientated individuals, same sex attracted individuals or same sex partners. In my search to define the concept various definitions became apparent throughout the literature. The fluidity of identity, orientation and behaviour makes the definition of the gay/lesbian individual particularly difficult. The following definitions have informed my understanding, and I continue to analyse the concept throughout my research study.

Brown's (1995) definition of lesbian identities are principally self-endorsed definitions held by women over time and across various situations as having primary sexual, affectional and relational ties to individuals of the same sex. Reiter (1989: 140 in Bernstein, 1998 [online]) states that a homosexual is an individual whose fantasies, attachments and longings are predominantly for persons of the same gender, who may or may not express those longings in overt behaviour, and whose orientation may or may not be accompanied by a homosexual identity.

In Chapter 2 I have chosen to utilise the term gay/lesbian in my review of literature. However this means that this term was not necessarily used by the researchers unless it is a direct quotation. I therefore acknowledge now that sources should be consulted directly when discussing their findings in future research.

1.4.4 Experience

"The notion of experience as subjective witness, writes Williams, is 'offered not only as truth, but as the most authentic kind of truth', as the ground for all (subsequent) reasoning and analysis" (Williams, 1985:128 as cited in Scott 1991).

WordNet (2009, Merriam-Webster Online, 2009) defines experience as the gathering of knowledge or expertise that results from participation in events or activities or as the result of personal observation or involvement in an event. WordNet (2009, Merriam-Webster Online, 2009) further define experience as a verb and as such as an event that an individual lives or goes through; Having firsthand knowledge of states, situations, emotions, or sensations, To undergo an emotional sensation or be in a particular state of mind, To go through mental or physical states or experiences.

It is the latter definition of the word on which I have focussed in my research study: looking at the coming out process that the significant others have *lived or gone through* and examining the *firsthand knowledge* they have acquired or to explore the *emotional sensation* and *mental or physical states* throughout this process.

Scott (1991: 781) summarises experience through alternative senses in which the term has been employed e.g. "(i) knowledge gathered from past events, whether by conscious observation or by consideration and reflection; and (ii) a particular kind of consciousness, which can in some contexts be distinguished from 'reason' or 'knowledge'". He goes further to elaborate that this consciousness refers to a full and active awareness which encompasses not only feeling, but thought as well (Scott, 1991) which thus forms part of the experience of any event or process.

1.4.5 Key terms associated with gay/lesbian studies

Homophobia refers to the negative attitudes towards, dislike of, irrational fear of, and in certain instances a hatred of homosexual people Individuals (Lubbe, 2005).

The term **heteronormativity** is utilised to describe a culture in which heterosexual norms and dogmas are supported and championed where at the same time it punishes or labels same sex attracted individuals as "wrong" or excludes their interests thus contributing to rendering their rights invisible. Thus heteronormativity indicates a culture in which heterosexuality is viewed as the norm and seems to be expected from its citizens. Nel and Joubert (1997 as cited in Polders, 2009) describe heteronormativity as an attitude which views heterosexual relationships as the only *acceptable* and *normal* development of relationships and sees other relationships as inferior or distorted.

Gender identity and sexual orientation are key terms associated with gay/lesbian studies. These terms are not interchangeable and refer to separate concepts within the gay/lesbian *experience* as it were. In my research study I focused mainly on **sexual orientation** as described by the American Psychological Association (2005: 1) as "a person's sense of identity based on those attraction-related behaviours, and membership in a community of others who share those attractions". Thus sexual orientation is defined in terms of relationships with others and in a continuum ranging from only same sex attraction to only attraction to the opposite sex (American Psychological Association, 2005).

Gender identity, also a complex construct, can be described as the internal experience of being male/masculine or female/feminine. Conflict can exist between an individual's physical body and psychological affiliation with the opposite sex (Polders, 2009).

1.5 Paradigmatic Perspective

De Vos (2005) mentions that all scientific research is conducted within a paradigm, which is a certain way of viewing the world. Within my research study I utilised the lens of interpretivism, the lens through which I consider the world and the lens through which I viewed my data and conducted my research.

This study seeks to understand subjective constructs central to personal experiences and therefore is placed within the interpretive paradigm. The main aim of interpretivist research according to Nieuwenhuis (2007a) is to offer a perspective of a situation and to analyse the situation under study to provide insight into the way in which a particular group of people make sense of their situation. As significant others construct multiple realities and assign different meanings to the coming out process, the interpretive paradigm is uniquely suited for this research study and will offer the best lens through which to view this phenomenon. I discuss my paradigmatic perspective in more detail in Chapter 3.

1.6 Research Design and Methodology: A Brief Overview

1.6.1 Research Design

A research design can be viewed as a strategic framework that guides research activity to ensure that trustworthy conclusions are reached (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2002). I propose to use a case study design in this research study. "Case studies strive to portray 'what it is like' to be in a particular situation, to catch the close-up reality and 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973b in Cohen Manion & Morrison, 2006: 254) of participants' lived experiences of, thoughts about and feelings for a situation" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2006: 254). In this research study the particular situation would refer to the coming out process of an individual and the experiences of significant others involved in that individual's life.

Fouché (2005) names three types of case studies namely the intrinsic case study; the instrumental case study and the collective case study. During this research study I utilised the instrumental case study to focus on the aim of gaining a better understanding of the phenomenon in the case (The significant others within my research study still allude to one case, but two groups).

In relaying and representing the data gathered in my research study I combined the intrinsic case study with narrative elements. Narrative research fulfils the purpose of a detailed exploration and attempt at understanding the experiences of an individual or small group and is supportive of the case study design implemented in this research. According to Patton (2002), narrative studies emphasise the understanding of lived experiences and perceptions of experiences. Creswell (2007) adds to this by saying that narrative research is employed to capture the life experiences of an individual or small group in detail.

1.6.2 Selection of Participants

To identify my participants I utilised a combination of snowball sampling and purposive sampling. Nieuwenhuis (2007b) mentions that snowball sampling is a method often used in qualitative research where participants with whom contact has already been established are used to penetrate their social networks. Purposive sampling is described as choosing a sample for a specific purpose (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2001). The sampling method is not chosen to represent the broader population, but rather to ensure relevant cases. Snowball sampling is useful for sampling a population where access is difficult, possibly due to a sensitive topic (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). My task as researcher was to identify the critical key informants with whom initial contact was to be made (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). These participants can then refer the researcher to other participants who could potentially contribute to the study (Nieuwenhuis, 2007b). These then directed me more purposefully towards significant others. Due to the sensitivity of the research topic I was made aware of possible research participants through current individuals who are known to me. I discuss the selection of my participants in greater detail in Chapter 3.

1.6.3 Data Generation Strategies

1.6.3.1 Primary Data Generation

i. Unstructured, interactive interviews (in-depth interviews)
I chose unstructured, interactive, face to face interviews as these offer the participants an opportunity to tell their story with minimal interruption by me as researcher. The questions emerged from the immediate context and were asked in the natural course of the conversation (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2006).

1.6.3.2 Secondary Data Generation:

i. Stories and letters/e-mails as field texts
In the times between conversations or interviews, the participants and I made use of "letters" in the form of electronic mails as another way of communicating and generating field texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The

proliferation of computer and information technologies over the past decade has begun to transform the landscape of research practices. Data generation can now include a variety of electronic methods as well (Gay & Bennington, 1999).

ii. Photographs and other personal, family and social artefacts
During the course of our lives we as people collect various artefacts and materials which represent certain "memorable moments" in our lives. Each photograph marks a special memory around which we construct stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Photographs can also provide background to an ongoing data generation scene and can serve as a way to show "how much" or to provide illustrations (Morse & Richards, 2002).

iii. Research Diary
Hughes (2000) provides the following reasons for keeping a research diary: Generating a history of the research study; keeping a record of the researcher's thinking and the research process; providing material for reflection; providing data on and for the research process, and recording the development of research skills. I therefore kept a research diary for record-keeping purposes, data generation and also reflective and evaluation purposes and found this was a useful tool.

Data generation is further discussed and elaborated on in Chapter 3.

1.6.4 Data Analysis Strategies

Qualitative data analysis is an ongoing process of bringing order, structure and meaning to the mass of generated data (De Vos, 2005). Qualitative data analysis tends to be an ongoing and iterative (non-linear) process, implying that data generation processing, analysis and reporting are intertwined and not merely a number of successive steps (Nieuwenhuis, 2007c).
I chose to adapt and utilise Creswell's (1998) analytical spiral of qualitative data analysis as used by De Vos (2005) shown below:

1. Planning for recording of data
2. Data generation and preliminary analysis
3. Managing or organising the data
4. Reading and writing memos
5. Coding the data
6. Creating a theme-map for each interview/participant
7. Generating categories, themes and patterns
8. Testing emergent understandings
9. Searching for alternative explanations
10. Representing, visualising (writing the report.)

The steps are followed with a discussion of how they were implemented in this research study in Chapter 3.

1.7 Ethical Considerations

During the research study I fulfilled the role of researcher and as such conducted myself in an ethical manner and adhered to the ethical code as stipulated by the University of Pretoria and the *Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA).* Throughout the research study I **informed** all participants of what was expected of them throughout the research; **explained** my role to participants and relevant role-players; **discussed** issues of confidentiality, anonymity and possible strengths and limitations involved in the research before conducting the research; **informed** participants of their voluntary participation; **attempted** to foster a warm and accepting environment throughout the study; **explained** and discussed the research process to relevant individuals; and **analysed** and interpreted the data responsibly and gave feedback to relevant parties. In the research study I also considered the issues related to **trust**, **informed consent**, **safety in participation** and **privacy.** These considerations along with others are explored and discussed in Chapter 3.

1.8 Quality Criteria

The disadvantages of narrative and case study design show that the results are not easily generalised (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999 and Huberman & Miles, 2002) as they only apply to the specific case on which this study focuses. To generalise findings is not the purpose of this research study and therefore this will not be a hindrance as I aim to explore only the experiences associated with this one case through the experiences related to me by the various participants in the research. I discuss the issues of *trustworthiness*; *credibility*; *dependability* and *conformability* further in Chapter 3.

1.9 Layout of the study

1.9.1 Chapter 1: Introduction

The first chapter includes a general overview incorporating the introduction to and rationale for the research study. The research questions, purpose statement and concept definitions are also included in this chapter.

1.9.2 Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter provides an overview and in-depth exploration of relevant literature on the coming out process, changes that may impact the coming out process and role player experiences previously documented.

1.9.3 Chapter 3: Research Methodology

In Chapter 3 the research process concerning the research design and methodology followed in the study are described.

1.9.4 Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Interpretation

The raw data, an analysis of the data and the research findings are presented in Chapter 4.

1.9.5 Chapter 5: Conclusion and Discussion

In Chapter 5 the results of the research are summarised and the conclusions drawn from the study presented. Recommendations for further research are also discussed.

1.10 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I provided an introductory orientation of the research study, provided a general overview of my research problem and rationale for undertaking the study. I stated the purpose of the research study, research questions and provided clarification of the key concepts involved in this research study. A brief overview was given of my research design and methodology as well as the paradigm within which the study will be conducted. Finally ethical considerations and quality criteria relevant to the study were mentioned.

In Chapter 2 I explore relevant literature to provide background for the research study and discuss my theoretical framework.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I discuss *the coming out process* as viewed in current and past literature. I also look at the meaning of *significant others*, the roles they play in the lives of gay/lesbian individuals as shown in literature and lastly I consider *experience* and what this term involves. This discussion provides the background that informs key concepts and lays the foundation for the interpretation of the data. The main focus of my research study is on the experiences of significant others. However the bulk of current literature focuses on the coming out process from the individual's point of view. Therefore I have utilised this as well as creating a context wherein my research study, the experience of significant others can be understood as they relate to the specific context and current literature. However the literature base relating to gay/lesbian experiences within South Africa is limited and therefore in this chapter I rely heavily on international studies, specifically USA and UK articles. The articles utilised do however provide globalised information necessary and appropriate to the research study. Significant others' experiences can only truly be understood in reaction to or against the backdrop of the individual's coming out journey.

2.2 The Coming out Process

In contemporary western society the phenomenon of coming out is recognised by most self-identified gay/lesbian individuals as an experience that they have in common: that moment of acknowledgment and affirming their "gayness" (Chirrey, 2003: 24) to themselves and as a disclosure event to their family and friends. Floyd and Stein (2002) mention that sexual orientation identity formation is a unique developmental task for gay/lesbian adolescents and young adults, also referred to as the coming out process, I would argue for any age when an individual acknowledges gayness. They mention further that because both the process of coming out and the personal implications thereof vary due to individual circumstances, there is no universal blueprint for the coming out process (Floyd & Stein, 2002) and it is a unique journey for each individual and family. I agree with them that there is a need for research to examine the diversity of coming out experiences of youths, but also think that research is needed for all ages and not only for individuals, but for examining the systemic effects and experiences of coming out. Disclosure, or coming out, is indeed central to the experience of being gay/lesbian (Morrow, 2001) and for each individual and significant other this is a milestone in their unique journey. Research cases can provide insight into the experiences and various factors involved during the coming out process and might lead to a better understanding for professionals, families and individuals involved on a personal level.

The process of coming out, however, is not always smooth and easy and the gay/lesbian individual often has to undergo challenges, battle fears of rejection and ultimately might find that not only has their world changed, but also the perceptions and expectations others have of them, all due to the disclosure of their sexual orientation. The same can be said for the significant others involved in that individuals' life as coming out affects more than just the

individual. In a study conducted by Eccles, Sayegh, Fortenberry and Zimet (2004:425.e16) one participant said, while describing his own and other gay youths' middle school experiences:

> "I think that they feel like they [gay kids] have to crawl up in themselves just to...you know. They're just terrified. I was terrified of coming out because I thought I would be...harassed left and right, not by my family, you know, but by peers."

Coming out does not just involve disclosure as a singular event, but is the navigation of many encounters and a journey on various levels in which new terrain needs to be negotiated continually. Morris (1997) describes coming out as the hidden minority announcing their sexual orientation. If sexual orientation is not announced or disclosed these individuals are often viewed as heterosexual as this is the most salient discourse and expected perception society has regarding sexual orientation. Each time a gay/lesbian individual meets a new person she must decide whether she will disclose her sexual orientation. Disclosure occurs throughout the lifetime and in a variety of settings and coming out is an ever present discourse in the lives of gay/lesbian individuals. There are factors which influence the perception of society regarding sexual orientation such as outward appearance, behaviour, interests and friends. These factors could lead individuals to make assumptions regarding sexual orientation. Therefore gay/lesbian individuals are constantly engaging in a risk assessment of their environment and the possible negative and positive effects of disclosure are considered (Morris, 1997; Saari, 2001; Halwani, Jaeger, Stramel, Nunan, Wilkerson & Murphy, 2008). In turn individuals are always constructing meanings they make based on interactions with others and consequently the disclosure of an individual can often shock others because it does not form part of the constructed perception they had of the individual involved.

There are many arenas in which an individual can come out or disclose their sexual orientation, for example to themselves, family and friends, at work, in the community and in society at large. The coming out process does not only involve the individual who comes out, but also the individuals to whom she comes out and their experience of the process. However before we can look at how the process is experienced, we need to know what the coming out process involves. This is discussed in the next section.

2.2.1. Definition

Defining the coming out process is no easy task. The term has been utilised in a variety of settings and the concept of the coming out process is discussed widely in research. There are also various terms used interchangeably with this term such as disclosure or sexual identity development. The table below adapted from Hamer (2003) shows an overview of some definitions of coming out found in literature.

Table 1: Overview of definitions of coming out (adapted from Hammer, 2003)

Researcher(s):	Definition of Coming out:
Creelman & Harris (1990)	Coming out is a process of recognizing, understanding and accepting homosexual identity.
Whitt (1993)	Coming out is a process of identity acceptance.

Joyce & Schrader (1997)	Coming out is one's own acceptance (beyond awareness) of one's own sexual identity.
Stenback & Schrader (1999)	Coming out is a process/phase in which a person acknowledges her own homosexuality to herself or others.
Waldner & Magrader (1999)	Disclosure or coming out refers to acknowledging a gay/lesbian identity to others.
Garnar (2001)	Coming out process/phase, associated with self-acceptance.

In the definitions above there are characteristics that are constant throughout such as the pre-existing gay/lesbian self and the process towards acceptance and disclosure of that identity. These characteristics are in tune with what Savin-Williams (1997 in Hammer 2003) views the common characteristics involved during this process to be: (1) seeing oneself as gay/lesbian, (2) disclosing this identity to others and (3) forming a same-sex romantic relationship. In this research study I focused on the first two characteristics as in my opinion they represent the main elements in the coming out process. Looking at research it seems as though romantic relationships may be present during various phases of the coming out process through experimentation or in a more consistent form, but acceptance and disclosure of identity play a larger part in the coming out process.

The process of coming out should be viewed as an incremental process, providing individuals with time to enable themselves, with the necessary life and communication skills, to negotiate each step of this journey (Butler & Astbury, 2008). Once a gay/lesbian individual has come out to herself, the next step or possibility opens up, namely coming out to others. Such disclosure could occur in the form of a major milestone event, e.g. coming out to parents, to a trusted co-worker, in one's faith community (Morrow, 2001), to friends, or to a possible love interest.

Coming out can be viewed as an individual's disclosure of sexual orientation to not only herself, but other individuals in her life (e.g. peers and family) (Anhalt & Morris, 1998; Stenback & Schrader, 1999). This is the definition of coming out that is in line with my current understanding of the literature and also with my research study. In this research study the coming out process could be regarded as the journey taken by an individual as she recognised her own sexual identity privately and thereafter disclosed this to significant others in her life. It also occurs as an ongoing process in the lives of gay/lesbian individuals in that the social environment in which they exist, presents ever-changing situations in which they must decide on a daily basis the degree to which they will disclose their sexual orientation (Morrow, 2001).

2.2.2 Stages or Not?

The coming out process is viewed by some as the sexual identity development of gay/lesbian individuals (Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter & Warren, 2009; Floyd & Bakeman, 2006). Developmental theories are usually aimed at providing stages, phases or steps in development to attempt explaining (or provide possible explanations) how development of a certain aspect progresses and the possible outcomes (functional vs. dysfunctional) of this

developmental process. This process can be viewed in a variety of forms and has been described by various researchers (e.g. Cass, 1979, 1984; and Morris, 1997).

In research there seems to be some debate as to the stages of the coming out process and where or when the process begins and ends. Various models of the coming out process or sexual identity development of a gay/lesbian individual have been proposed/developed and are summarised in the table below.

Table 2: Various models of the coming out process

Researcher(s):	Proposed model of coming out process:
Cass (1979)	Cass proposed six non-age specific stages: (1) identity awareness: developing an awareness of being different; (2) identity comparison: Acting heterosexually after considering that she is homosexual; (3) identity tolerance: accepting the reality of being homosexual; (4) identity acceptance: exploration of the gay/lesbian community; (5) identity pride: becoming active in the gay/lesbian community; and (6) synthesis: acceptance of self and others. (Adapted from Cass, 1984; Jordan & Deluty, 1998 and Beaty, 1999)
Coleman (1982)	Coleman described five developmental stages: (1) pre-coming out: individual knows that she is different, homosexual feelings are not conscious; (2) coming out: individual has admitted to self that she has homosexual feelings, but no clear picture of sexuality has formed; (3) exploration: individual experiments with newly recognised sexuality (4) first relationships: learning skills required for same-sex relationship (5) identity integration: bringing together public and private identities to form a whole identity. (Adapted from: Jordan & Deluty, 1998; and Beaty, 1999)
Troiden (1989)	Troiden proposed four age-specific stages in the formation of a homosexual identity: (1) sensitization: (beginning before puberty) experience homosexual feelings without an understanding of the implications for self-identity; (2) identity confusion: (occurring during adolescence) realizing that she may be homosexual; (3) identity assumption, the individual comes out as a homosexual; and (4) commitment, adopting a homosexual lifestyle. (Adapted from Beaty,1999; and Floyd & Bakeman, 2006)
D'Augelli (1994)	D'Augelli offered a "life span" model of sexual orientation development that takes social contexts into account, it describes six "identity processes" that operate independently and

	are not ordered in stages: (1) Exiting heterosexuality (2) Developing a personal LGB identity (3) Developing an LGB social identity (4) Becoming an LGB offspring (5) Developing an LGB intimacy status (6) Entering an LGB community (Adapted from: Bilodeau & Renn, 2005)
Morris (1997)	Morris discussed the coming out of lesbians as a multidimensional process. Four dimensions are presented and explored. (1) Sexual identity formation: development of lesbian sexuality and awareness of being a lesbian. (2) Disclosure of sexual orientation to others. (3) Sexual expression and behaviour. (4) Lesbian consciousness which refers to how lesbians see themselves in relation to the social environment, including lesbian and gay communities. (Adapted from: Morris, 1997)

Several models of the coming out process have been proposed as can be seen from the table above and in various other researches (e.g. Cass, 1979, 1984; Coleman, 1982; Cox & Gallois, 1996; Gonsiorek & Rudolph, 1991; Morris, 1997; Rotheram-Borus, Hunter, & Rosario, 1995; Savin-Williams, 1990; Troiden, 1988, 1989 as cited in Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz & Smith, 2001). The models shown above describe a process of increasing adaptiveness as the individual negotiates sexual orientation and disclosure in a society in which heterosexuality is the norm (Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz & Smith, 2001). Some earlier models (Coleman, 1982 and Troiden, 1989) described the coming out-process as a set of age-specific stages or developmental stages to progress through, moving through one stage or developmental level before progressing to the next, in a sequential manner.

However, the later models (D'Augelli, 1994 and Morris, 1997) conceptualised coming out as development that did not follow a linear path through a number of set stages. Furthermore these models discuss coming out as a multi-dimensional process of development throughout life without age-specific progression. The process is one of identity formation and integration. In addition Saari (2001) states that coming out is seen erroneously as a single event or more often as a developmental process that the gay/lesbian individual completes in a linear stage process so that, once the stages are complete, she has mastered the difficulties. Saari (2001) and Morris (1997) state that each time a gay/lesbian individual enters a new environment the necessity to come out is repeated and new difficulties may arise. Therefore throughout life stages may be revisited and new skills applied and developed.

There are various possibilities and perspectives that can be considered when examining developmental theories. Taylor (1999) mentions that there appear to be individual variations present in the coming out process of each individual which would suggest that coming out does not occur in an orderly sequence, or in given set stages. I agree with this statement and view the coming out process as an ongoing, non-linear process. The process comprises various milestones, as defined by literature, but is firstly a unique process defined by the gay/lesbian individuals' journey. Moreover the coming out process is unlikely to follow a universal linear progression as each individual's process will be characterised by distinctive features. Coming out is therefore more than just a set of stages to pass through on the way to the finish line, but rather part of the development of a gay/lesbian individual.

In conclusion when considering the literature and varying opinions held by researchers concerning the coming out process Anhalt and Morris (1998) and Stenback and Schrader (1999) focus on two stages when discussing the coming out process namely (1) Coming out to oneself and (2) Coming out to others (as identified by the gay/lesbian individuals' as individuals they view as significant in their lives). These two characteristics focus on the experience of the individual and on the experience of the significant others. For the purpose of my research study I aim to explore how various significant others experience the coming out process as it relates to the following: (1) coming out to one-self and (2) coming out to others. The coming out process therefore can be viewed in these two parts, and in the research study I have therefore not combined them, but focus on these aspects separately when talking to participants and generating my secondary data. Once again, as stated, it is my opinion that the significant others' experience can only be understood against the backdrop of the coming out experiences of a specific individual. The coming out process can further also be viewed from two separate extremes discussed below, as a crisis or as constructive.

2.2.3. Coming out Seen as a Crisis

I agree with Hillier (2002) when observing that when individuals become aware of their sexual desire for an individual of the same sex as themselves, the realization could be accompanied by the uncomfortable reality that feelings such as these are regarded as taboo in their current context or culture. A first instinct then might be to hide the same-sex-desiring part of personal identity from society. Disclosure of sexual orientation is not an easy task for most gay/lesbian individuals for a variety of reasons such as fears of rejection, discrimination, ostracism, and violence from others. Indeed, the prospect of disclosing orientation to family and friends is among the most stressful gay-related life events noted by gay/lesbian youths (D'Augelli, 1991; Rotheram-Borus, Rosario, Van Rossem, Reid, & Gillis, 1995 as cited in Maguen, Floyd, Bakeman & Armistead, 2002). In turn family and friends have to then disclose to others that their friend/family member is gay/lesbian and this could be regarded as a stressful life event for them as well.

In order to cope with stress and escape the perceived and expected stigmatization associated with being gay/lesbian, individuals may hide their orientation from family and friends (Martin, 1982 as cited in Maguen, Floyd, Bakeman & Armistead, 2002). However hiding means that relationships are based on deceit and fear of discovery.

This could in turn place additional stress on relationships, and the gay/lesbian individual could feel burdened by the charade she has to portray for the sake of her friends and family. Many young people described looking in from the outside, at their families and friends (and at times themselves) as they upheld the facade of heterosexuality (Hillier, 2002: 80). Friends and family could also feel saddened when they find out that an individual feared coming out, as well as betrayal after years of being deceived. Family and friends may also choose to conceal that their friend/family member has come out as well due to fear of the reactions of others or due to their own feelings of inadequacy when dealing with reactions and experiences of others. Taylor (1999) mentions that understanding systemic influences and the experiences of various individuals involved will enable professionals to intervene and support systemically within the gay/lesbian individuals' life, as well as in the lives of significant others involved in this process. However I also feel that a greater understanding of these experiences in general will help society understand and accept individuals who might otherwise feel that they are battling an age-old expectation of heterosexual cultural discourses that they cannot meet. In society there is often an overemphasis on the expected norm of heterosexuality that most individuals are expected to adhere to, Gagne, Tewksbury and McGaughey (1997) refer to this as the gender binary. This expectance can create a power struggle leaving many individuals feeling that they themselves are bad, wrong or alone in the world and experience themselves initially as sick or deviant. Avoidance by individuals in the general public after disclosure could also be viewed as a negative consequence of disclosure (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003). This is also not just aimed at the individual who came out, but also at significant others, who fear a difficult life and battle for acceptance for their child or friend.

Adjusting to the knowledge of their newly emerging status as gay/lesbian, individuals may respond to felt or expected stigma (Scambler & Hopkins 1986 as cited in Taylor, 1999). They may perceive and react to discrimination which they expect (and perceive to be real), but which may not be conveyed by their environment. This felt or expected discrimination is then anticipated as a consequence of being gay/lesbian, and in turn individuals who come out, might react to perceived stigma by evaluating the potential for discrimination (real or imagined). This in turn may lead to individuals remaining silent and not disclosing their sexual identity due to fear of the expected aftermath. Fear of rejection, for example, can prevent gay/lesbian women disclosing their sexual identity to health care professionals (Hitchcock & Wilson 1992 as cited in Taylor, 1999). Expected reactions and perceived fears could influence individuals' decisions to come out to friends, family members and the broader community negatively, leaving them lacking support and feeling isolated. After disclosure, family and friends may also experience this expected stigma and view the world through gay/lesbian coloured glasses examining and looking for signs of discrimination or judgement. These fears are sadly not unrealistic as the fear of bodily harm (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003) is a reality as can be seen from incidents reported in the news and media. Negative beliefs are also echoed in a study undertaken by South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) during 2003-2007 to determine the tolerance towards same-sex relations where 80% of the population aged above 16 answered "*always wrong*" to the question "*Do you think it is wrong or not wrong for two adults of the same sex to have sexual relations?*".

Furthermore coming out to friends can prove to be particularly stressful and individuals report a fear of rejection and loss of social support (Anhalt & Morris, 1998: 221). Individuals may lose friends and suffer the loss of some support, but they may also find acceptance, new friends in society and within the gay/lesbian community with which they can now openly associate. However coming out could also mean that the perception society or friends held of the individual has been altered in some way and could lead to friends acting differently around the individual who has come out while adjusting/coming to terms with the disclosure. The changes could be associated with friends feeling somewhat uncomfortable and not knowing how to react to the individuals' disclosure. The change in behaviour could lead to the individual experiencing friends as acting uncomfortably. The change in behaviour on the part of friends could play a part in their experience of being accepted or rejected by their friends. It could form part of a stressful time in the lesbian individual's life, as well as the lives of friends and family as they adjust to the disclosure.

Anhalt and Morris (1998) also discuss stressors related to sexual orientation in gay/lesbian youth such as (a) victimization related to sexual orientation, (b) fear of and negative consequences related to coming out to others, and (c) high-risk sexual behaviours. This can be viewed as potential stressors as these events described above are not experienced by all individuals after coming out, and others who experience these events might not find them stressful.

As mentioned in Chapter 1 literature shows that in response to the process of coming out, families undergo a process of destabilization that could be detrimental or uplifting to the family relationships. The gay/lesbian individual also comes out within various subsystems in their own life that could lead to times of crisis or stress. However the experiences of family members and other individuals have received selective attention in research, although their stories and experiences form an integral part of the journey and possible understanding of the coming out process. During this time of destabilization there can be various adverse consequences to coming out, but the possibility of positive growth and experiences during this process cannot be denied. The process can also give rise to constructive/progressive effects that can fulfil and enrich the lives of those involved.

2.2.4. Coming out Viewed as Constructive/Progressive

Although the coming out process seems to be related to various factors, this does not mean that each facet of the process is associated with only negative experiences or elements. The coming out process can also provide a space where individuals can celebrate their individuality and reaffirm their own unique identity, not only to themselves, but to the significant individuals in their lives and lead to the formation of meaningful, honest relationships. Ragins (2008) refers to these benefits as self-verification and identity centrality and I agree that these are only a few of the positive effects of disclosure.

Coming out may lead to a higher self-esteem, more open and supportive family relationships (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003) for the individual and family members, as well as understanding and support from a network of individuals. These are but a few progressive outcomes of the coming out process not to mention the development of an

integrated sexual identity which reflects the self of the individuals as they truly feel. Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz and Smith (2001) state that involvement in more gay/lesbian activities, positive attitudes toward homosexuality and self-disclosure of sexual identity to more individuals are specifically associated with high self-esteem in gay/lesbian individuals. Individuals also feel a relief of stress for not having to keep secret an integral part of their identity (Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz & Smith, 2001; Ragins, 2008). Furthermore better interpersonal relationships are created due to lack of secrecy (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003) and individuals and significant others may experience a sense of renewed energy, after the need for secrecy has been eliminated.

Increased job satisfaction (Day & Schoenrade, 2000) is another positive consequence of disclosure. Ragins (2008) argues that job satisfaction could be linked to greater clarification of roles in both work and non-work environment as well as better continuity of roles across these subsystems (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003). Furthermore Day and Schoenrade (1997) state that employees who come out at work report less uncertainty related to their roles, less role conflict, and less reported conflict between various life domains, e.g. work and home, than those who do not come out at work. Coming out across various life domains and systems can also increase social awareness which, in turn, may lead to various social and institutional changes (Ragins, 2008). Becoming more visible, political and social needs of gay/lesbian individuals can be addressed more directly.

Coming out to others can allow individuals to gain access to a culture and community of like-minded and accepting people, where they feel welcome and "they experienced a sense of self-recognition, and most quickly aligned themselves with new potential identities" (Gagne, Tewksbury & McGaughey, 1997: 490). Existing relationships may be challenged, but can also grow into truthful and accepting relationships. This process can provide individuals with the freedom to accept and live their true identity with the knowledge that they need not deceive anyone or feel that they are worth less than any other member of society.

Literature shows that, in the context of families, the coming out process could contribute to a family undergoing a period of uncertainty and change. The family could progress from a level of awareness of the individuals' sexual orientation, to coming to terms with this realisation and adjusting to it (Carr, 2006), leading to a family where all members feel valued and accepted for whom they are and not how well they fit the mould of a heterosexual society. This process of coming out involves coming out to the gay/lesbian community, to heterosexual peers and to various individuals in the family. Carr (2006) argues that the more supportive the response of members of these three systems, the better the adjustment of the individual. Therefore I examine the coming out with a broader view, because as Carr states there is more than one system involved in the coming out process within which an individual interacts in life.

2.2.5. Coming out: A broader view

Although the decision to come out is a personal one, disclosure has been facilitated by institutions such as advocacy and support groups. These groups, made up of people who have come out, can become valuable

community resources. They provide a variety of services, including support for individuals who wish to disclose, recreation and shared experiences aimed at fostering a sense of community within the larger community and possibly perceived hostile culture and advocacy/political efforts to further promote gay/lesbian pride (Kates & Belk, 2001).

Saari (2001) mentions that in the course of everyday life, an individual ordinarily encounters, not a singular or static environment, but rather a wide variety of contexts that make different demands on adaptive behaviour. An individual cannot function in a social void or environment in which their actions have no impact on others. As such, an individual needs to be capable of accommodating, or at the very least comprehending, her relationship in a specific contextual variety. I, therefore, endeavoured to examine the experiences of those significant others in the life of a gay/lesbian individual as they form an integral part of the contextual relationships in this process.

Coming out to others involves an individual's disclosure of sexual orientation to people in her life and in a variety of contexts such as family, friends and work environments. Once an individual recognises that her homosexuality is fundamental, a balance can only be achieved by identifying with a group where homosexuality is the norm (Taylor, 1999). By becoming part of the gay/lesbian subculture or group discourse such an individual can validate and normalise her way of life and her view of herself. Hence gay/lesbian identity formation needs to be viewed in a social context rather than solely on an individual level. The coming out of an individual therefore moves beyond the individual's experience and involves those around her, affecting relationships in her life and how she negotiates through various social and relational contexts and situations: moving from an individual level to a broader social level where significant others are affected.

Individuals also need to face additional systems where coming out could be necessary for integration of various life roles. Griffith and Hebl (2002) found in their study that one of the most fundamental motivations that people possess is a need to belong and have social support, and this same motivation could have profound implications in the workplace. Consolidation of roles and relationships across systems could provide various positive consequences.

Ragins (2008) states that as a group within systems becomes larger and more visible, power relationships could shift, and perceptions may become less negative in organisations/subsystems (e.g. work place). Disclosing at work as well as working for an organisation that is perceived as being more supportive of gay/lesbian individuals, has been associated with higher job satisfaction and lower job anxiety (Griffith & Hebl, 2002). However Tejeda (2006) found that individuals reported higher levels of hostility after disclosure and individuals who did not disclose reported higher levels of promotion than those who did. Even though positive strides have been made, there remains the ever present consideration of possible negative and possible positive consequences following disclosure which individuals need to consider before deciding to disclose.

Organisations and communities that offer support to individuals who wish to disclose do so by passing hate crime legislation and implementing policies and procedures that protect members of society against discrimination and other adverse consequences of disclosure. (Tejeda, 2006; Ragins, 2008). Griffith and Hebl (2002) mention that individuals who acknowledge and receive favourable and supportive reactions from others feel happier and less stressed in the workplace. Griffith and Hebl (2002) also mention that the reactions co-workers have on disclosure impact on the perceptions and relationships of gay/lesbian workers' job attitudes. There is, however, no specific formula to calculate the definite positive and negative consequences. It is a personal process undertaken by each individual to assess the various possibilities and decide whether to disclose or not.

2.2.6 Broader Society

As gay/lesbian individuals function within various systems a question arises - how do these systems view gay/lesbian individuals? Martin, Hutson, Kazyak and Scherrer (2010) mention that their research (Seidman) had confirmed incomplete normalization of the gay/lesbian identity in society. Systems are still moving towards the normalisation, and could currently view gay/lesbian individuals as abnormal based only on their sexual orientation. I agree with Biblarz and Savci (2010) when they mention that critics often question the possibility of acceptance for a multiplicity of family forms, including gay/lesbian families, in a society where heteronormativity is expected of most individuals and so become entangled in various levels and layers of the concepts related to family.

Bech (1999 in Martin, Hutson, Kazyak and Scherrer, 2010) explores how possible sexuality-based stigma could affect heterosexuals' outlook and identities and how the expectation of heteronormality influences the experiences of others. Research suggests that overall society is still structured by heteronormativity—the mundane practices, norms, and institutions associated historically with heterosexuality (Martin, Hutson, Kazyak & Scherrer, 2010).

Gay/lesbian individuals, therefore, need to function in a society where there is still a very real expectation of heterosexuality that they need to, or might feel the pressure to conform with. Oswald (2002) states that integration gay/lesbian identity/image refers to the reconciliation of homosexuality with other aspects of identity, such as ethnicity and religion because they may be enmeshed with strong heteronormative perceptions.

2.3 So who are Significant Others?

As previously discussed the two central aspects of the coming out process with which this research study is concerned, include: coming out first to the self and then to others. Questions now arise as to who these *others* are, what they mean to the individual and how they experience the coming out process? These *others* are the significant others that I included in my study. These individuals will not be identified through what research states, but from what the individuals perceive and whom they identify to be significant others in their lives as they are the true experts of their experience. It is important in this research study not to assume who these significant others are, but to ensure that they are identified by the individuals themselves.

We could ask "what role do significant others play in our lives?" or "does what they do or think truly matter?" but when reading literature on coming out and examining the personal experiences of others through their stories, the message becomes clear quickly. Significant others, how they react, what they think and their acceptance do in fact matter. (Savin-Williams, 1998, Savin-Williams, 2000; Plummer, 1995). When considering theories involving parental acceptance and rejection it becomes clear that individuals have an enduring, biologically rooted need for positive responses from primary attachment figures (Rohner, 2004 in Willoughby, Doty and Malik, 2007: 72) and parents in turn want a positive and good relationship with their children. These primary attachment figures in early life refer to our primary care givers in most cases. Later in life we form new attachments to individuals involved in our lives on a broader social landscape, as it were a *chosen family*. Both our primary care givers and our chosen family could form part of the individuals identified as significant others.

When valued and respected significant others oppose actions or ideas through which sexual identity is explored, they effectively communicate a sense of deviance (Gagne, Tweksbury & McGaughey, 1997) which could contribute to individuals withdrawing or living in a world of secrecy to protect their relationships with significant others. Gay/lesbian individuals monitor their parents' and friends' behaviour and comments, looking for clues about their attitudes toward homosexuality and their potential reactions to them in the event of a disclosure (Hillier, 2002). Often parents and friends are unaware of this. Significant others play a part in how gay/lesbian individuals experience their own coming out experience and could be regarded in themselves as risk or protective factors throughout the process.

Findings in a study conducted by Butler and Astbury (2008) concluded that participants observed (a) that *meaningful peer interactions* were important for the safe navigation of developmental pathways, and (b) that *particular family patterns of support and dysfunction* were established long before issues related to sexual identity struggles had the opportunity to shape those patterns. Families and friends could, therefore, fulfil supportive or destructive roles. Traditionally, friends and family members are accepted as significant others and they were also identified as such by my research participants. The next section of the literature, therefore, focuses on the review of these two groups of significant individuals.

2.3.1. Family

2.3.1.1. Definition

Family is a term seemingly known by all, but what does the term imply? Is it a heterosexual nuclear family with a mom, dad and children or can family be seen as more than a mere generation of individuals. Family is defined by Say and Kowalewski (1998:5-6 as cited in Morrow, 2001: 54) as "a committed relationship, developed over time, between persons who participate in each other's lives emotionally, spiritually, and materially" and families may include a variety of members. This definition as it shows a commitment to each other that has developed over time in various areas of one's existence. This definition can encompass biologically related individuals, as well as individuals who are not biologically related and who are not part of the nuclear family.

Furthermore Walsh (2003: 401) states that a basic premise in the systemic view is that a stressful event and continual challenges have an impact, not only on the individual, but on the whole family. I also agree with Walsh (2003) when stating that family distress can be seen as resulting from various influences and the interaction of both individual and family vulnerability. It is this systemic effect and the interaction between individuals which I explore in my research study. Brooks (2008) emphasises that all family members are affected by a stressful life event experienced by one family member. It is this shared bond within a family that can, not only identify them as family members, but also as significant others within the gay/lesbian individual's life.

2.3.1.2. Coming out to family

There are a myriad of concerns, hopes, dreams and expectations that parents have of their children, underpinned by the expectation (even unconscious or assumed) that their children will eventually take up a heterosexual or straight lifestyle. Same-sex sexual attraction, homosexual sex, or a gay/lesbian identity all lie outside the parameters of what the family or parents generally regard as normal or healthy (Hiller, 2002). It can, therefore, be a difficult task for a child to go against these expectations and disclose their attractions and sexual orientation to parents. Many children are also aware of their parents' prejudices or discrimination on a very personal level and might not feel that they can disclose their sexual orientation as they fear they might incur discrimination and also possible rejection.

Anhalt and Morris (1998) identify some consequences of coming out to family which could also impact negatively or contribute to stress during the coming out process such as increased conflict when coming out to family members and greater expectations of responsibility by parents from the individual concerning the disequilibrium experienced within the family. Tenuous family relationships could also be negatively affected by the disclosure of the individual's sexual identity. Communication, cohesion and family relationships could be tested in such situations and lead to unexpected or unanticipated results. The family relationships may also suffer when the individual comes out, but as is evident from various coming out stories and experiences, there is the potential for the development of authentic relationships and honest family interaction.

Coming out to family can also lead to various positive and constructive reactions such as renewed energy and decreased stress levels for both the family and individual due to breaking the secrecy. Family identity, as well as the individual's true identity, can also be integrated and developed so that family cohesion is improved. Higher self esteem and better interpersonal connections also have an impact on family interaction and may lead to less role conflict, better communication and a greater feeling of trust and stability. A continuity of identity and roles across various life domains also enhance the benefits and positive, constructive consequences of coming out to family.

Willoughby, Doty and Malik (2008) describe coming out to parents as one of the most difficult developmental milestones for gay/lesbian individuals. Often they fear the reaction from their parents, but also know that their parents might have additional questions they are unable to answer or that their parents might want them to change their minds. Hiller (2002) mentions that gay/lesbian individuals know that their sexual desires are an unexpected

divergence that are unlikely to be welcomed or accepted by their parents and this knowledge is a heavy burden for them to carry. They know that their sexual identity means that they will not fulfil the roles or dreams their parents might have imagined for them and that their actions and choices might surprise their parents, challenge their beliefs and place possible strain on their relationship with family.

i. Deciding to come out to parents
Individuals consider a variety of aspects when deciding whether or not to come out to their parents. Hillier (2002) found that these could include factors such as concern about hurting parents, causing embarrassment, and disappointment to parents, the potential loss of position in the family or parental love and, in the worst-case scenario, the possibility of complete rejection and expulsion from the family home.

Coming out to parents has been noted as one of the most difficult developmental milestones for gay/lesbian youth (Savin-Williams, 2001; Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006). Parental reaction can span a continuum from shock, anger and denial to relief and acceptance (D'Augelli *et al*., 2005; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003 as referenced in Riley, 2010). Reactions of sadness, denial, anger, and self-blame seem to be most frequently experienced by parents (Willoughby and Malik (2006) in Willoughby, Doty and Malik, 2008). Feelings of loss, shock, disappointment and shame have also been reported by parents after their child's disclosure (Lasala, 2000). However each case is unique and various reactions can be expected; no specific set of stages can be applied to the process and more research is needed to explore this aspect of the coming out process in itself. Later in the study possible reactions and consequences following disclosure are discussed in greater detail.

Waldner and Magruder (1999) argue that understanding coming out to parents depends on various aspects, including family relations, identity expression and perceived resources. Riley (2010) found that individuals disclosed to their fathers (or families) for several reasons (e.g., because "it was time" to elicit support or because they feared their father/families would learn from someone else). These reasons seem to indicate that individuals waited for a specific time or moment to disclose to their families and also attributed meaning to this time. Others choose to disclose to avoid the costs of keeping a current romantic relationship hidden (Riley, 2010). D'Augelli, Hershberger and Pilkington (1998) indicate the following possible variables that might be related to the decision to disclose to parents: the number of years that an individual has been aware of homoerotic attractions; number of years an individual has self-identified as gay/lesbian; identifiability to strangers; and parents' reactions (or potential reactions for the non-disclosed) to sexual orientation disclosure. Therefore other individuals outside the family are also seen as part of the decision to come out or disclose to parents. Sometimes a romantic relationship can be viewed as the specific push needed for an individual to come out to parents. There are various reasons as to why individuals decide to come out to their parents and each individual will have her own specific reason. This can be viewed as part of the coming out process and a part of each individual's journey.

ii. How to come out
There are many ways in which individuals could come out to parents or other family members or friends such as face to face, telephonically, in a letter or even via the internet (e.g. e-mail, facebook, blogs). Riley (2010) mentions

that disclosure of sexual orientation is especially difficult for individuals to discuss with friends or family, might be easier using the "virtual world" where there are forums, including blogs, where they are able to discuss their sexual identity. Chat rooms, blogs or e-mails can provide individuals with some needed distance from their own situation and the internet can be utilised as a way to come out, as well as a resource for advice on how to navigate the process. The electronic community or network found on the internet can also provide individuals with a social network where they can normalise their own experiences, feelings and behaviour. The social network or pseudo culture provided by the electronic community can be an initial replacement for a subculture to which they have, as yet, not gained access. This technology would be limited to areas where access to internet and these social networks are accessible and available such as traditionally Western societies.

Savin-Williams and Ream (2003 in Riley, 2010; Savin-Williams, 1998) found that the majority of individuals chose to disclose to parents in person. There were, however, instances where individuals were more indirect when disclosing to certain individuals, e.g. their fathers and may even have decided to inform them by letter or e-mail. Talking to parents can be a big and challenging step and some individuals may feel that they can express themselves more adequately in a letter or e-mail and so use an opportunity to explain and share all they need to. This may also allow them to distance themselves from their parents' initial shock and to engage with their parents after the initial reactions have subsided. They may also utilise letters or the internet as a way to come out and gauge the reaction from a distance, fearing the reaction of their parents and placing the next move in their parents' hands. A growing number of gay/lesbian adolescents are disclosing their sexual orientations to their mothers and fathers in the USA (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 1999 in Willoughby, Doty & Malik, 2007). This can be seen in a positive light as they may wish their parents to know their *true selves* which form a central part to their coming out process.

Parental reaction may depend on (1) the availability of family-based resources to manage the stress, (2) the meaning ascribed to a stressful event, and (3) the convergence of co-occurring stressors taxing a family's coping resources (Willoughby, Doty & Malik, 2008). Additionally a family might also be *more* prepared or expect a disclosure based on past experiences or their own suspicions, for instance gender a-typicality may provide parents with clues, which could prompt disclosure, or the adolescent may behave in a certain way to stimulate their parent's suspicions and force inquiries (D'Augelli , Grossman & Starks, 2005). Parents' belief systems, previous experiences with same-sex relationships and the prior relationship with their child might also influence their reactions. In some cases strong religious or other conservative beliefs leave parents with a predominantly negative view towards their gay/lesbian child (Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998).

iii. Following disclosure
Parents' initial reaction may vary and the process following disclosure is a unique journey of adjustment, questions and coming to terms with the news. Robinson, Walters, and Skeen (1989 in Willoughby, Doty & Malik, 2008) found in their survey that two thirds of mothers reported negative responses and described the reaction as grief-like. This is echoed by Lasala (2000) who describes some parental reactions as following the Kùbler-Ross's five stage

grieving process. Furthermore in a study conducted by Hillier (2002) she found that after coming out to parents, not many parents celebrated their child's sexual orientation and their reactions ranged from passive acceptance at best through tears, screaming, and at worst rejection and ejection of the child from the family home. When individuals decide to share with parents, they have often spent years coming to terms with their own identity and parents might be caught off guard and not know how to react or be prepared for the news (Savin-Williams, 1998). A common initial reaction described by Savin-Williams (1998) includes parents asking questions such as "what did I do wrong?", "were we not good enough?" Questioning their parenting practices and asking themselves if they were inadequate role models, parents might also blame each other initially or a neighbour or school friend as they often look for somewhere to place blame or a way to *explain* what was happening. These reactions are often present and can be expected to form part of the parents' journey during the coming out process. Each journey follows a unique route and can end in acceptance, passive interaction, denial or rejection. Parents can also fluctuate between these alternatives. Rejection and prolonged negative reactions to coming out could be detrimental to individuals on a variety of levels and can be seen when considering developmental theory and the assertion that parental responses to the individual's disclosure could partially foretell the social, emotional and behavioural trajectories of gay/lesbian youth (Willoughby, Doty, Malik, 2007).

Given the importance of parental acceptance in the functioning and development of individuals, parents' reactions to coming out are likely to play a key role in the future development of a gay/lesbian individual. The importance of parental reaction does not end with their initial response. Savin-Williams (1998) mentions that encouraging the youth to share the history of her same sex attractions and discussing her feelings and concerns will start to normalise her sexuality and the parent child alliance. This could then be a first step towards building a stronger and more open relationship and growing towards a positive and honest relationship. After disclosure Savin-Williams and Dube (1998) found that individuals generally understood why their parents were emotional or upset initially. They also found that individuals do, however, have more trouble dealing with denial and having their parents patronise them by refusing to believe that they know their own feelings (Hillier, 2002). The difficulty with parental denial could indicate that they experience an assertion of their own identity when disclosing their gay/lesbian sexual orientation to their parents. The assertion of their own identity could also affirm their independence and self-confidence.

Dominant cultural discourse around gay/lesbian identity also plays a large part (Morris, 1997) in how parents view their child and how they might perceive their child as living by the rules of society. For some parents a challenge is relaying this information to the rest of the family and community. Their own fear of rejection and discrimination on account of their child may contribute to challenges they experience themselves. In certain cases parents remain unwilling to consolidate their beliefs with their child's disclosure and become estranged from their child or push her out of their lives. This can be seen as detrimental to the development of the gay/lesbian individual. Rejection by parents has been implicated in the development of attachment disorders, academic problems, substance abuse, depression, conduct problems, and troubled interpersonal relationships (Hale, Van Der Valk, Engles, & Meeus, 2005; Pedersen, 1994; Piko, 2000; Salama, 1987 as referenced in Willoughby, Doty, Malik, 2007).

Some parents deal reasonably well with the disclosure of their child's sexuality although some challenges are experienced. Parents can also exhibit support because they prefer their daughters' girlfriend to a past relationship or notice that the current relationship has a positive effect on their daughter. Savin-Williams and Dube (1998; Hillier, 2002) however, found that some parents also failed to listen and still hoped that it was just a phase. This could influence individuals who come out negatively as they might feel that their disclosure is not being taken seriously and that their parents feel that they can fix them. In some cases parents react negatively to begin with and then gradually move towards acceptance after contact with health professionals or self-help groups (Hillier, 2002), information centres and organisations such as the Durban Lesbian and Gay Community and Health Centre, the Joint Working group, The Lesbian and Gay Equality Project and OUT LGBT Well-being, among others. Parental acceptance can be viewed as a protective factor and positive influence as it has been associated with an array of positive behavioural and psychological outcomes, such as relationship satisfaction, positive peer relationships, and the development of pro-social behaviours (Rohner, Rohner, Khaleque, & Cournoyer, 2004)

The significant others identified by the research participants included mainly their parents and a selected number of friends. More research is needed on sibling reactions in general as most literature focuses mainly on the reactions of parents. Savin-Williams (1998) mentions that siblings often feel angry, confused or embarrassed and if their brother or sister discloses to them, they might be placed in an awkward or burdensome position or their relationship could deepen and become more positive and intimate over time. I now move to the next group of significant others identified - friends.

2.3.2. Friends

Research shows that youths typically come out to friends before family (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003 as cited in Riley 2010). This is not surprising because one of the major influences on individuals is their peer group. We seem to define ourselves with whom we associate. Individuals might feel that friends are more likely to accept them and their choices than their family. However, Riley (2010) mentions that not all individuals want to come out to their friends since they may not want to risk ridicule or the possibility of losing a friend. The fear of rejection is not only limited to family, but extends to friends as well. For some individuals friends might seem more significant, as they are involved in their lives more directly on a day-to-day basis than family. When considering the coming out process of a gay/lesbian individual coming out to friends can be stressful and also liberating, as friends can provide additional support. After coming out to friends, gay/lesbian individuals can now feel free to enter the community of gay/lesbian individuals. They can broaden their support network and gain access to individuals who can normalise their experiences and provide insight and understanding. I subsequently look at how coming out could be seen as it relates to gay/lesbian friends vs. *Straight* (heterosexual) friends.

2.3.2.1 Gay/lesbian

There is evidence that gay/lesbians are more likely to disclose their identity to gay/lesbian friends than to heterosexual friends, family, or co-workers (Bradford, Ryan, & Rothblum, 1994 in Morris, 1997). This might be because they feel more assured of acceptance and understanding with their gay/lesbian friends than with their

heterosexual friends, family or co-workers. It seems that more individuals come out to their gay/lesbian friends than their straight friends or family (Morris, 1997). When disclosing their sexual identity gay/lesbians have to battle preconceived notions and general social discourses. In the face of these tasks they might find comfort and solace in being welcomed into a gay/lesbian subculture through disclosure as gay/lesbian friends are the least likely group to reject them (Jordan & Deluty, 1998). Entry into this subculture can also provide gay/lesbians with a much needed support network which they cannot gain from elsewhere in an environment where they can freely experiment, search for guidance or answers and come to terms with their gay/lesbian identity without ridicule.

Another important consideration is the contact and immersion of the individual in gay/lesbian social networks. Theory and research (e.g. Cass, 1979, 1996; D'Augelli, 1996; Fox, 1995; Herdt & Boxer, 1993; Savin-Williams, 1995; Troiden, 1989 as referenced in Floyd & Stein, 2002) have indicated that social contact with other gay/lesbian individuals can help others come to terms with a self-definition of sexual orientation identity as well as provide social support to cope with stigma and feelings of alienation from the hetero-social world. During the coming out process this can be of great value as it provides a space where individuals who come out can feel accepted. However to gain access to this support network some measure of disclosure is necessary as without it, it is impossible to gain access to support for one's sexual orientation (Jordan & Deluty, 1998). Morris (1997) found that individuals felt more comfortable disclosing their sexual orientation to gay/lesbian friends and that they did thereafter come out to their straight friends, gaining access to another support network.

2.3.2.2 Straight

Straight friends can contribute to stress or can become allies during the coming out process. They can also move from one to the other. The gay/lesbian rights movement has been unique in offering individuals the title of allies for joining the group and demonstrating support (Cortese, 2006 as cited in Stotzer, 2009). Allies make a conscious effort to provide support to and protection of stigmatised group members, and they may confront individuals, groups and institutions on behalf of stigmatised groups (Ragins, 2008). Stotzer (2008) describes *straight allies* as heterosexual individuals who are active members in a cause-related gay/lesbian group. This can be a way for them to affirm their support in a visual way but there are also individuals who support and accept gay/lesbian individuals without being publicly or actively involved with an organisation. I therefore agree with the statement made by Cortese (2006:5) that argues that allies can also be supporters who may or may not be part of an organisation. Supportive ally relationships can provide various forms of support for disclosure and may include relationships with family, friends and co-workers (Ragins, 2008). Friends can form part of this group of allies but then, to gain access to the support of this group of allies, disclosure becomes somewhat of a necessity.

Diamond and Lucas (2004) found that the gay/lesbian females who came out to heterosexual peers had a larger peer network than those who did not, but also ran the risk of experiencing greater fears and loss of friendship. The degree of disclosure to family and friends is significantly related to overall level of social support, specifically, *being out* to friends, whether straight or gay/lesbian, and was the best predictor of overall social support (Jordan & Deluty, 1998).

Attitudes of friends may shift over time, whereas the initial social reaction may be negative, current social reaction is likely to be more positive (Jordan & Deluty, 1998). Much research deals with the negative reactions of significant others and departs from a predominantly negative perspective where attitudes of friends are concerned. Stotzer (2008) uses a term coined by Pittinsky (2005) "allophilia", meaning "liking or loving of the other" to describe positive attitudes that develop towards gay/lesbian individuals. Research provides evidence that intergroup friendships are more likely to lead to reduced biases and increased positive attitudes (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005) regarding friendships between gay/lesbian individuals and straight friends. Heinze and Horn (2009) support this in their findings that having a gay/lesbian friend is related to more positive attitudes towards homosexuals/homosexuality.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

Systems theory was developed to understand individuals, families and communities and the relationship within them as well as between them and the social context. Systems theorists seek to explain the behaviour of complex, organised systems of all sorts—from amoebas to families and can be described as a way of looking at the world to examine or explain how various aspects of systems are interconnected to one another (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). I have therefore chosen *systems theory* as the theoretical framework for my research study. Systems theory underscores the aim and purpose of my study and is therefore a suitable theoretical framework from which to answer my research questions. This theory regards different levels and grouping of the social context as "systems" where the functioning of the whole system is dependent on the interaction between all the parts (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2002). The following four assumptions adapted from Thomson (2005) were adopted in the theoretical framework:

1. A system (e.g. family) consists of (1) entities*(individuals)*, (2) a certain way that entities relate to one another (*relationships*), and (3) specific ways (*processes)* by which the entities (4) function to produce development (*experiencing and interacting*). How and why people develop as they do is explained by changes in the integrated system's entities, the pattern of their relationships and the process of their experience and interaction.

2. A change in one entity (*individual*) or area in the system does not leave the other entities or areas of the system untouched. Instead, change in any part affects other entities and their interrelatedness in big or small ways (*adaptation or reaction*).

3. Systems can be either closed or open. In a closed system no existing components leave and no new components so much as enter. An open system, on the other hand, is one in which components can change over time, develop, change or leave. The research study was conducted in an open system.

4. Systems are dynamic in nature. A dynamic system is one that displays two characteristics. First if a dynamic does not only act in response to, and under the guidance of some outside force or agent, but dynamic systems are self-regulating and automotive. Second, the components within the system are not static but in constant motion, shifting and adjusting among themselves.

Systems consist of various entities/components as described above. However each entity/component can be seen as a system in itself. Therefore each system includes the presence of subsystems that interact with one another as well as the whole system, e.g. two members of the family interacting with each other and also with the family as a whole. The system itself also interacts with other parallel systems and it can also interact with wider systems outside it, e.g. two families interacting with one another. The various levels and entities/components within the system are shown in the diagram below as an illustration of the systems involved in the case study.
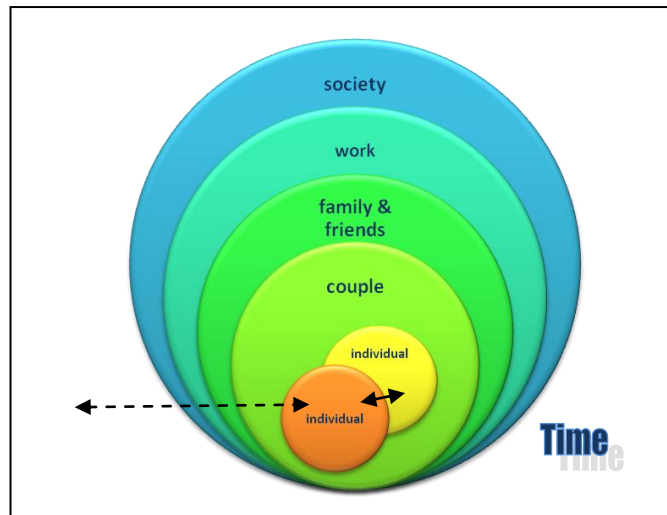
Figure 1: Systemic representation of the case study

Systems are interrelated and as such no action in any one part of the system can be seen as the direct cause of an action in another part. Actions or changes in any part of the system can instead be viewed as affecting the rest of the system throughout in a cyclical pattern (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2002; Thomas, 2005). The various levels within the diagram are interrelated and impact on one another. The element of time is also represented as the system is not static but subject to changes that occur over time and are dynamic in nature.

Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana (2002) mention that several other elements and processes are important in understanding any system: *Goals* and *values* of the system, both obvious (openly stated) and hidden goals and values of the system; *subsystems* within the system are different and sometimes overlapping groupings within the system occur; *communication patterns* that show how clearly and directly communication occurs between systems and subsystems in their functioning and interaction; how *roles within the system* are defined and how the roles are acted out to preserve the open goals of the system; the functioning of a system or subsystem is affected in various ways by how rigid (closed) or flexible (open) the *boundaries* are; all human systems change and develop over *time* and *developmental* changes in parts of the system influence the whole.

Utilizing systems theory in this way as my theoretical framework supports the provision of answers on the interrelatedness and experience of significant others in the coming out process as the individuals form part of a system. Their experiences, interactions and relationships with each other will be best described by not looking at them in isolation. By regarding the case study as a whole system which is more than just the sum of its parts, the

interrelatedness of various individuals can be seen as well as how they impact on each other's experiences throughout the process.

2.5 Concluding Remarks

Coming out to oneself and to others can be viewed as a personal journey. Coming to terms with individual as well as familial questions and deciding how to come out has a unique set of considerations and challenges for each individual. Reactions to coming out have been viewed as crisis and as progressive. However, what one can be certain of is that no single event only is at play here. The wider social system and interaction with various areas in life present further challenges to coming out, which indicate that coming out can never be seen as completely over.

Coming out also cannot be viewed as isolated and linear, but rather systemic in nature. Coming out involves the individuals who come out as well as family and friends within various contexts. Understanding the experiences of significant others therefore needs to be viewed in relation to the experiences of the individuals who come out, with an awareness of other subsystems, relational patterns and development over time.

Significant others can be supportive, neutral or a hindrance throughout the coming out process. Family and friends are most often viewed as the significant others and their reactions have a marked impact on the gay/lesbian individual coming out. The coming out process is an intricate journey involving various individuals, relationships and societal norms. The experience of various significant individuals has the potential to broaden the understanding of the coming out process as well as support practitioners in their assistance of families or individuals. In the following chapter I discuss the research methodology I utilised during the research project and the process I followed.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the framework for my research methodology. Attention is given to the paradigm I chose, my research design, methodology and my role as researcher. I also explore the quality criteria of my study as well as the relevant ethical considerations.

3.2 Paradigm

De Vos (2005) mentions that all scientific research is conducted within a paradigm, which is a certain way of viewing the world. Within my research study I considered the world, my data and the conduct in my research study through the lens of interpretivism.

Terre Blanche and Durrheim (2002) state that paradigms are all encompassing systems of interrelated practice and thinking that define to researchers the nature of their inquiry. They continue by saying the inquiry is defined along three lines, namely the nature of reality (ontology); the nature of knowledge (epistemology) and; the method to obtain knowledge (methodology). The meaning that we ascribe to contexts and behaviour around us is coloured by this way of viewing the world. The way in which knowledge is constructed, reality is viewed and knowledge bases enriched thereby falls within a specific paradigm. In the case of my research study the experiences of significant others through their actions and the meanings they have ascribed to the coming out process. The personal involvement and subjectivity of the researcher in the process of interpreting a specific event, process or characteristic is also regarded as central to interpretivism (Jansen, 2007 and Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2006).

This study seeks to understand subjective constructs central to personal experiences and is therefore placed within the interpretive paradigm. The main aim of interpretive research according to Nieuwenhuis (2007a) is to offer a perspective of a situation and to analyse the situation under study to provide insight into the way in which a particular group of people make sense of their situation. Since significant others construct multiple realities and assign different meanings to the coming out process, the interpretive paradigm is uniquely suited for this research study and will offer the best lens through which to view this phenomenon. Terre Blanche and Durrheim (2002) mention that: researchers working within the interpretive paradigm assume that an individual's subjective experiences are real and should be taken seriously (ontology); that we can understand others' experiences through interaction and by listening to what they tell/share with us (epistemology) and that qualitative research techniques are most appropriate to accomplish this (methodology).

The interpretive perspective is based on five assumptions mentioned and discussed by Nieuwenhuis (2007a) namely that **human life can only be understood from within**, therefore in this research study I did not remain on the outskirts, but I interacted with the participants within their context and aimed to explore the phenomenon from

within. **Social life is a distinctively human product**. During the research study I attempted to understand the way various participants constructed their reality through social interaction and experience each situation differently (e.g. the coming out process) resulting in various experiences and multiple perspectives. **The human mind is the purposive source or origin of meaning**. Through exploring the meaning constructed by each participant, my own understanding about the coming out process was enhanced and I attempted to explore the meanings significant others have ascribed to the process. **Human behaviour is affected by knowledge of the social world**. Therefore I did not examine the phenomenon in isolation, but included multiple perspectives of participants and research colleagues and multiple data sources and data generation strategies to study the phenomenon as clearly as possible. **The social world does not exist independently of human knowledge**.

I acknowledge that my own prior knowledge (or lack thereof) and that of the participants influence the meaning ascribed or derived from the coming out process and therefore I utilised techniques to ensure credibility and trustworthiness as discussed later. Interpretivism emphasised the meaning that individuals or communities assign to their experiences (Jansen, 2007). It is for this reason that I chose this paradigm as it focuses on the experiences of the significant others in the gay individual's life and was not based on my own limited prior knowledge in this respect. As mentioned above, qualitative research techniques are best suited to the interpretive research paradigm. Qualitative research usually studies people or systems through interaction with and observation of the participants in their natural environment and focussing on meanings and interpretations (Holloway & Wheeler, 1996 in Nieuwenhuis, 2007a). I therefore adapted a qualitative research design to best complement the interpretive paradigm and assist in answering my research question.

3.3 Research Design

"*To answer some research questions, we cannot skim across the surface. We must dig deep to get a complete understanding of the phenomenon we are studying. In qualitative research, we do indeed dig deep: We collect numerous forms of data and examine them from various angles to construct a rich and meaningful picture of a complex multifaceted situation.*" - Leedey & Ormond (2005: 133)

A research design is viewed as a strategic framework that guides research activity to ensure that trustworthy conclusions are reached (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2002). I chose to conduct a qualitative research study. The characteristics of a qualitative research study mentioned by Creswell (2009) appealed to me as interpretive researcher. These characteristics, discussed below, include that qualitative research usually occurs in the **natural setting** of the participants; the **researcher is a key instrument** for generating data and does this through a variety of methods. Qualitative researchers gather data from **multiple sources** rather than rely on a single data source. Working with **inductive data analysis** ensures that patterns, categories and themes are built up from the ground and participants are often involved as well. In qualitative research it is important to capture the **meaning that participants** ascribe to a phenomenon. The research is flexible and allows for an **emergent design**; **interpretive**

inquiry takes into account that the researchers interpret what is seen, heard and understood. They also endeavour to create a **holistic** image of the research study in developing a complex picture of the phenomenon in context.

These characteristics formed a central part in my research study, during planning, implementation and data analysis stages and therefore qualitative research best suits my study and me as researcher. Within qualitative research there are many possible research designs. I chose to utilise a **case study design** in my research study as it was best suited to answer the research questions posed.

A case study provides us with a better understanding of a complex social phenomenon (De Vos, 2002) and has been utilised in a multitude of settings such as medicine, education, psychology, law, political science, sociology and anthropology. A case study can be regarded as an exploration of a case in which multiple resources (e.g. observations, interviews, audio-visual material) are used to generate in-depth data and refer to detailed investigations of individuals, groups or social units that produce *thick* descriptions (Kukard, 2006:53, De Vos, 2002, Creswell, 2007, Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).

There are three types of case studies, namely the instrumental case study; the intrinsic case study and the collective case study (Fouché, 2005). Harling (2002) mentions that the instrumental case study is utilised to provide a general understanding of a phenomenon using a particular case and the case chosen could be a typical case. During this research study I utilised the instrumental case study, to focus on the aim of gaining a better understanding of the phenomenon using a particular case. (The significant others within my research study still allude to one case.)

Leedy and Ormrod (2005:135) state that a case study may be suitable to help a researcher understand a phenomenon about which little is understood. "Case studies strive to portray 'what it is like' to be in a particular situation, to catch the close up reality and 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973b in Cohen Manion & Morrison, 2006: 254) of participants' lived experiences of, thoughts about and feelings for a situation" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2006: 254). This described what I wished to achieve and were in line with the way in which I wanted to answer my research question. In my research study the particular situation refers to the coming out process of individuals and the experiences of those individuals and the significant others involved in their lives. As researcher, I strove to develop a better understanding of this experience and the multiple perspectives associated with it.

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2006) mention that the purpose of a case study is to portray analysis and interpret the uniqueness of real individuals and situations, through accessible accounts. This statement coincides with what Fouché (2005) mentions, namely that the case study is focused not on understanding the issue, however rather to describe the case being studied. This was in accordance with my wish to gain better understanding of the coming out process and the various experiences of significant others and meanings they ascribe to the process. I wish to interpret the experiences of various significant others during the coming out process as relayed to me in their own

words. Utilizing a case study design afforded me the best way of conducting my research as it allowed the research participants to give accessible accounts and provide me with a way of generating data which were relevant to the research setting within which I was working.

In relaying and representing the data gathered in my research study I combine the instrumental case study with narrative elements. A narrative research design fulfils the purpose of a detailed exploration and attempt at understanding the experiences of an individual or small group and is supportive in the case study design implemented in my research study. According to Patton (2002) narrative studies emphasise the understanding of lived experiences and perceptions of experiences. Creswell (2007) adds to this by saying that narrative research is employed to capture the life experiences of an individual or small group in detail. I utilise elements of narrative design in support of the case study design and as outline for reporting the findings of my research study. It also afforded the participants the chance to have their story told and to narrate their experiences and the meanings they ascribed to the process of coming out.

Some **strengths and advantages** associated with narrative and case study designs include that they are immediately intelligible and easily understood by a wide audience without the need for excessive explanations and use of jargon. They exhibit strong, rich descriptions of a case and incorporate unique features which might have been lost if another research design was used, as normal everyday data are captured from participants' everyday lives, ensuring a unique and holistic picture. The researcher is involved in the case and the research can build and grow even when unanticipated events occur (Cohen Manion & Morrison, 2006, Leedy & Ormrod, 2005); Participants are more involved and may experience a level of empowerment/catharsis through telling their stories and through the utilisation of case studies specific elements and characteristics of a case can be emphasised to ensure that the research study is correctly focussed.

The **limitations and disadvantages** of narrative and case study design reveal that the results are not easily generalised (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999 and Huberman & Miles, 2002) as they only apply to the specific case on which this study focuses. However to generalise findings was never the purpose of my research study and therefore this was not a hindrance as I only aimed to explore the experiences associated with one case through multiple role-players. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2006) further mention possible problems with the cross-checking of data resulting in possible bias, subjective, personal or selective results. Case studies are also susceptible to problems of observer bias. Therefore I took measures to combat this, namely using: multiple data gathering techniques; the involvement of several researchers to verify my findings; and additional quality criteria discussed later. I agree with Creswell (2007) when he states that a researcher must be experienced to identify the relevant information needed for research. This posed a challenge for me as researcher, but through the quality criteria discussed in detail later and the supervision of an experienced researcher this limitation was dealt with adequately. Throughout the research study I attempted to control all possible limitations and address challenges, as they arose, as adequately as was possible.

3.4 Research methodology

"As a study proceeds, the qualitative researcher gains increasing understanding of the phenomenon under investigation and so becomes increasingly able to ask specific questions and formulate specific hypotheses. As they learn about what they are studying and so can ask more specific questions, so, too can they better specify what methods they should use to answer those questions. The methodology in a qualitative study, then, continues to evolve over the course of the investigation."

Leedy and Ormrod (2005: 134)

3.4.1 Selection of participants

To identify my participants a combination of snowball and purposive sampling was used. Nieuwenhuis (2007b) mentions that snowball sampling is a method often used in qualitative research where participants with whom contact has already been established, are used to penetrate their social networks. Purposive sampling is described as choosing a sample for a specific purpose (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2001). The sampling method is not chosen to represent the wider population, but rather to ensure relevant cases. My task as researcher was to identify the key informants with whom initial contact had to be made (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007), to find a way into the world of my participants. These participants or individuals who are aware of the research study could then refer me as researcher to other participants who could potentially contribute to the study (Nieuwenhuis, 2007b).

Due to the sensitivity of the research topic I was made aware of possible research participants through individuals who were known to me. I utilised snowball sampling and connected with individuals who were known to me and/or had come out, and gained access to participants within their social network. These individuals were not known to me on any personal or professional level before I contacted them concerning the research project. I found snowball sampling useful for sampling a population where access was difficult due to a sensitive topic (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007) and closed social group and I found it to be useful in my research study. They led me to possible research participants, a lesbian couple, who then directed me more purposefully towards significant others.

Gaining access to the gay and lesbian subculture seemed daunting to me at first. However as individuals became aware of my study through discussions or via friends I had talked to, individuals approached me with contact numbers or e-mails for individuals whom they felt might want to participate in my research study. I also spoke to individuals who were known to me and experienced their own coming out process, I chose not to include these individuals in my research study as it would be difficult to separate the different roles of friend and researcher. These individuals then gave me the contact details of others whom they thought might be willing to take part in the research study or who they felt would be willing to share their journey with me as researcher. The possible participants were then contacted by telephone or electronic mail and asked whether they would be willing to take part in the research study.

For the purpose of this study significant others who had been involved in a coming out experience or were currently involved in a coming out experience of gay/lesbian individuals were sought. The main focus of the research study is on the experiences of various individuals throughout the coming out process and therefore the following selection criteria applied:

- Participants had to be eighteen years or older.
- Participants had to understand and speak Afrikaans or English.
- Participants had to be or have been involved in a coming out process.
- The act of disclosure had to have occurred a year or more ago.
- All participants had to give their verbal and written permission to participate in the study.
- Participants had to be willing to undergo interviews and share their experiences.

After contacting the individuals who indicated that they would be willing to take part in the research study, I, being the researcher, informed them of the possible benefits and limitations and also made them aware of what the project would entail. I emphasised the fact that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from participating at any time. After a few individuals were contacted, my participants were selected and willing to take part in the research study aimed at answering the question "how significant others experience the coming out process?" and share their personal journeys with me as researcher.

During my research study I was in contact with a number of individuals who had indicated that they were willing to participate in my research study. I did not have a preconceived idea of who the study would focus on, but only looked for same-sex-attracted individuals who would be willing, along with their significant others, to share their experiences and journey with me. The first participant I considered was a businessman. Scheduling appointments and accommodating his travelling, created difficulties that resulted in several missed or postponed appointments. Although he was willing to participate in the study, scheduling a time to meet that fitted both our schedules as well as his travelling arrangement, became too difficult and alternative participant options needed to be explored.

Two alternate suitable participants were contacted and both indicated that they would be willing to participate in the research study. I then had to select the participant I felt would be most useful in answering my research questions. One was a single man and the other a woman who had recently been married to another woman. I chose to include the married couple in my research study. Both women were willing to share their separate and joint journeys, with me in the research study. They indicated that they would feel comfortable with their significant others also being involved. I considered this as being the best way to investigate the experiences of various significant others in a systemic manner. I expected the married couple to ensure a larger number of participants for the case study as well as a more complex interplay of systems. As the couple I the chose to include in the study were both women, my research study therefore focussed subsequently only on lesbian individuals.

The choice was not one based on accessibility or comfort. Participants and significant others were spaced out over three cities and in two provinces. Between 60 – 350 km travel at a time was involved to ensure the face to face interviews. I am satisfied with the participants chosen and feel honoured that they shared their journeys with me. My participants in the study include the married couple, Leigh and Allison, Leigh's mother and father, Allison's mother and a friend of Allison and Leigh. The friend has known Allison since high school, but has become Leigh's friend as well over the years. My research participants are further divided into two groups - the lesbian individuals (Leigh and Alison) that shared their experiences with me and the significant others they identified as mentioned above. Both Allison and Leigh refer to the *individual* mentioned in my primary research question and title. I focus on Allison's individual journey and her parents shared their experience throughout her coming out process with me. Leigh also shared her personal and individual journey with me and her parents also elaborated on their experience of her coming out process. Thus each individual and their significant others shared their experiences with me. I also felt that choosing the couple would enrich the story of their experience on another level, thus providing a larger systemic view.

The journey of coming out starts with coming out to the self, as was discussed in Chapter 2, and therefore including both Leigh and Allison was integral to the research study. The second aspect of the coming out process, coming out to others, relates to my main research question "How do significant others experience the coming out process of a lesbian individual?" Leigh and Allison were, therefore, asked to indicate who the significant others in their lives were. They both indicated their parents and friends.
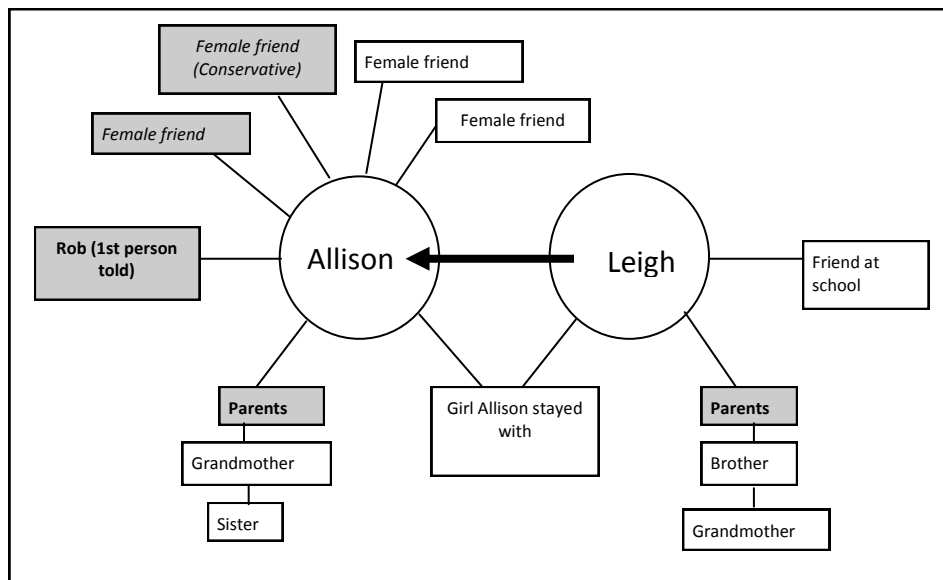
Figure 2: Mind map of significant others identified

The diagram above is a depiction of a mind map which Allison and Leigh (as separate individuals and as a couple) drew for me on my first visit to them. They drew the mind map to identify the significant others they felt were involved in the process of their coming out/disclosure. This is a depiction of the individuals they identified as the central/core group of individuals involved in their respective coming out stories. Some individuals were identified as significant in the past, such as Leigh's high school friend (depicted to the far right). However, she does not regard

her as significant at this time in her life and has lost touch with her. Other individuals were identified as being significant and are still significant at this time in their lives.

Allison and Leigh identified the significant others in their lives that they believed I needed to speak to, to gain an awareness of their experience. They also identified these individuals as the most significant individuals for them during the process. These are the individuals who are shaded in the diagram. All possible participants were contacted, but the two female friends identified by Leigh and Allison were unable to take part in the research study at this time. The second group of participants, the significant others, were identified by Leigh and Allison as relevant to their process. As mentioned earlier and in alignment with the interpretivistic and constructive nature of my research, I would not presume to know who the *significant others* were in the process, but I trusted my participants to identify the necessary and relevant individuals.

The diagram also depicts a part of the systemic nature of the study as seen through the systemic framework I utilised as my theoretical framework in this research study. In this context the couple, Leigh and Allison, must be viewed as central to the process of examining the experiences of significant others as they form the core of the case study. However, although I have interviewed Allison and Leigh and their data will be included in the study, my main focus was on the significant others as identified by them and not on them as individuals or a couple.

Leigh and Allison provided me with contact information for the individuals they identified and also indicated that they would inform them of the research study they were involved in. I contacted the individuals identified by the couple, by telephone and e-mail, to explain the aim of the research study and invited them to take part. Interview dates were then scheduled with the individuals who indicated that they would be willing to participate and so the research journey of fieldwork began.

3.4.2 Data Generation Strategies

3.4.2.1. Primary Data Generation:

i. Unstructured, interactive interviews (in-depth interviews)
I chose unstructured, interactive, face to face interviews as they offered the participants an opportunity to tell their story with minimal interruption by me as researcher. The questions emerged from the immediate context and were asked in the natural course of the conversation (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2006). The questions were not planned beforehand and probes were utilised for clarification and to elicit better understanding. This appealed to me as a researcher as I wished to generate my data in an appropriate and natural setting where participants would not feel intimidated or pressured to provide specific answers. Unstructured interviews also suited this research study as they are appropriately used in studies where the researcher seeks to learn primarily from participants what matters (Morse & Richards, 2002) as is the case in this research study. Leedy and Ormrod (2005) also state that unstructured interviews are more flexible and likely to yield information that the researcher had not planned on. It appealed to me as it ensured that although I did not have control over the line of inquiry, there was not a rigid limit

on what could be shared or asked during the interview. As I did not have any personal experience in the area of investigation I wished to do exactly that and truly learn from the participants what mattered to them and what their experiences were. This was not an easy task and although questions arose during the course of the interview and helped me to focus on certain elements, it was truly in the hands of the participants to relay their experience using their words. This helped me to ensure that I learned from participants what was important to them and did not follow my own assumptions.

Not all data were covered during the course of an interview and new questions arose after examination of the data and from reflection on my research diary. As researcher I asked questions about whatever was unclear during the first interview, I also clarified and utilised member checking during a second interview and e-mails to ensure that relevant data was generated and elaborated on when necessary. The second interview also helped me to ensure that research participants were comfortable with the way I represented their journey. I endeavoured to create an informal environment of trust for interviews and sharing of information. Since a voice recorder was utilised participants seemed to feel uncomfortable at the beginning of interviews and so I did my best to put them at ease and assure them of confidentiality.

Advantages of Interviews

- An interview allowed me as researcher to have some control over the line of inquiry and to direct the flow of conversation when necessary.
- Participants could provide background and historical information that was relevant to the research study that would perhaps not have come to light otherwise.

Limitations of Interviews

- Provided information filtered through the views of the participants (however this is the aim of my study, to uncover the participants' own experience during this process and I view this as an advantage.)
- Researcher presence may bias responses and information gathered (crystallisation is utilised to combat this measure.)
- Not all individuals are equally articulate and perceptive. (Various data generation techniques were implemented to combat this fact. The flexibility of the study also allowed for adaptations. Some participants could write, others talk and others could send photos if they so wished.)

(Adapted from Creswell, 2009:179)

3.4.2.2. Secondary Data Generation

i. Stories and letters/e-mails as field texts
During the times between conversations or interviews, the participants and I made use of "letters" in the form of electronic mails as another way of communicating and generating field texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). These communications were also analysed for relevant data. The proliferation of computer and information technologies over the past decade has begun to transform the landscape of research practices. Data generation can now include a variety of electronic methods as well (Gay & Bennington, 1999). I, therefore, did not limit the participants in the

study to the use of pen and paper, but utilised letters in electronic format, as well as stories, compiled by the participants as a data generation method in the research. The first group of participants (Leigh and Allison) shared their experiences with me via e-mail and this added another dimension, not only to the data-gathering process, but also to the data analysis process.

When examining the stories written by some of the participants, as not all were willing to complete this part of the research study, I could see that the experience had been discussed in greater detail and represented in a more organised, chronological time frame than during the interview. These stories provided me with additional as well as supportive data and a personal rendition of the participants' journey and an additional perspective and confirmation of my understanding of their experiences.

Advantages of letters/e-mails
- A quick response can be elicited.
- This provides participants with another platform or manner of expression.
- Provides additional data penned by the hand of participants.

Limitations of letters/e-mails
- Communication could prove to be somewhat one-sided if letters or e-mails are not answered (this was not a concern experienced in my research study as all communications were answered in a timely manner).
- Not all participants are equally eloquent on paper.
- Not all participants communicated necessarily in this manner.

ii. Photographs and other personal, family and social artefacts
During the course of our lives we as people collect various artefacts and materials. We may collect and save photographs or other artefacts that are significant reminders of people and events which represent certain "memorable moments" in our lives. Each photograph marks a special memory around which we construct stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Photographs can also provide background to an ongoing data generation scene and can serve as a way to show "how much" or to provide illustrations (Morse & Richards, 2002). Photographs provide participants with a way of showing part of an experience that other techniques could not provide. Looking at specific artefacts or symbols that have meaning for the individual during informal conversations are utilised as self-imposed probes that may help the participants tell their story more accurately. These artefacts were therefore also taken into account during the data-generating and analysis phases of the research study. During the study no specific artefacts were mentioned by the participants, but some photographs were brought forward by the participants and formed part of the study. Photographs were utilised to show me their wedding. Allison also showed me the tattoo on her arm of Leigh's initial, which held intrinsic symbolic meaning for her.

Advantages
- It is an unobtrusive method to generate data and gain access to how the participants view the context.
- It provides participants with an opportunity to directly share their reality and what they perceive as important.

- It is creative in that it captures attention visually (and provided participants with an additional way to express their experience).

Limitations
- It might not be publically or privately accessible (however in the research study the photographs were provided to me by the participants and referred to a specific event and context in their lives).
- This method proved difficult to interpret.

(Adapted from Creswell, 2009:180)

iii. Research diary

Hughes (2000) provides the following reasons for keeping a research diary, generating a history of the research study; keeping a record of the researchers' thinking and the research process; providing material for reflection; providing data on and for the research process and recording the development of research skills. I kept a research diary for record-keeping purposes, data generation and also reflective and evaluation purposes and found it to be a useful tool.

In a research study undertaken by Nadin and Cassel (2006) they found that the research diary was a valuable tool, prompting insights which informed a variety of methodological and theoretical decisions in relation to the research. I also found that by reflecting on the various aspects of my research and writing down specific events or memos in my research diary, I gained deeper insight into the research itself on various levels. It helped to distance me from my research and go back to previous areas where I still felt unsure and so learnt to improve current research practices on my part.

Advantages
- Allows me as researcher to reflect on the process and write down reflective notes.
- Accessible to me as researcher at convenient times and served as an unobtrusive data source.
- Provided me with the opportunity to place some distance between me and the research and evaluate my practice.

Limitations:
- It is time-consuming and should be done regularly (this however is a part of the research that I was aware of and I considered this and updated the research diary when necessary).

(Adapted from: Creswell, 2009:180, Hughes, 2000)

After locating and contacting participants the data generation process, or rather journey began. I met with participants at their homes in an attempt to ensure a space where participants would not feel threatened or uncomfortable. This, entering other people's homes, was a daunting task. The participants were unknown to me and I not only had to make them feel comfortable, but I had to remain calm and focused to ensure that I generated the required relevant data to answer my research questions.

Each interview had its own tone and process. Nowhere did I find exactly what I had expected in my mind. My first interview was with the couple, Leigh and Allison. I had expected meeting two individuals whom I would need to *draw out* people feeling somewhat uncomfortable with the subject and talking to me about such a personal experience. Allison, in her beautiful high heeled shoes, welcomed me warmly and invited me in. Inside I met Leigh, a little more reserved waiting to hear what I had to say. After explaining confidentiality and asking them to share their process with me Leigh took the lead and started talking. During the interviews I had to continually remind myself of my role of researcher. I attempted not to discuss too much but it was difficult, especially when participants became emotional, to always remember the line between researcher and therapist as I am both, as an individual. I endeavoured to gather data as my main aim and adhered to this during the in-depth interviews conducted.

During the various interviews I conducted with the couple, Leigh's mother, Leigh's parents, Allison's mother and a friend I could see that in-depth interviewing was the right choice for the study. The participants spoke easily and added their own experiences to their stories. It afforded them the space to tell their story with minimal interruption. I accepted that they knew their process and experience best. They were also aware of what they wanted to share and how they wanted to do this. They spoke openly and answered any question I had, thoughtfully, affording me the opportunity to clarify concepts and experiences I wanted to know more about. The process was much smoother than I expected. Not many participants had any artefacts or pictures that they wished to share with me, but Leigh and Allison sent a selection of their wedding pictures for me to see. A culmination of events and an official ceremony to show their commitment to each other attended by their families. Allison also shared her memoirs with me that she had begun to write before becoming involved in the research study. Leigh also shared a time line that she constructed after our interview with me. Both of these personal accounts greatly enhanced my understanding of their experiences.

The interviews were, as expected, my greatest data source. However observations and reflections in my research diary also helped me to make sense of the data and find supportive data for what I had found during analysis. My research diary and reflections were also my first step in data analysis. These processes function together or in parallel during the research process and do not function separately. The secondary data present to support the data gathered from the interviews consist mainly of Leigh and Allison's personal accounts, an email or two from Allison, photos sent to me by the couple depicting their wedding - all of my research participants in attendance, and my research diary. The other participants did not feel comfortable writing their own experiences down and they were aware of the option to decline. However I still have rich descriptions and interviews through which to explore their experiences and looked forward to sharing my representation of their experiences with them to view their reactions.

3.4.3. Data Analysis Strategies

Qualitative data analysis is an ongoing process of bringing order, structure and meaning to a mass of generated data (De Vos, 2005, Creswell, 2009). Creswell (2009:183) views it as "moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data".

Leedy and Ormrod (2005: 151) utilise Creswell's data analysis spiral and simplify it into four steps, namely **Organisation of data**; **Perusal of the data**; **Identification and categorisation of data** into themes and sub-themes; **Integrate and synthesise the data** for readers. However qualitative data analysis tends to be an ongoing and iterative (non-linear) process, implying that data generation, processing, analysis and reporting are intertwined and not merely a number of successive steps (Niewenhuis, 2007c, Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).

De Vos (2005) uses Creswell's (1998) analytical spiral of qualitative data analysis as is shown in Figure 3. I adapted and utilised these steps as a guide in the analysis of the data generated in this research study. After the figure the various steps involved in the data analysis process will be discussed in greater detail as they relate to my research study.
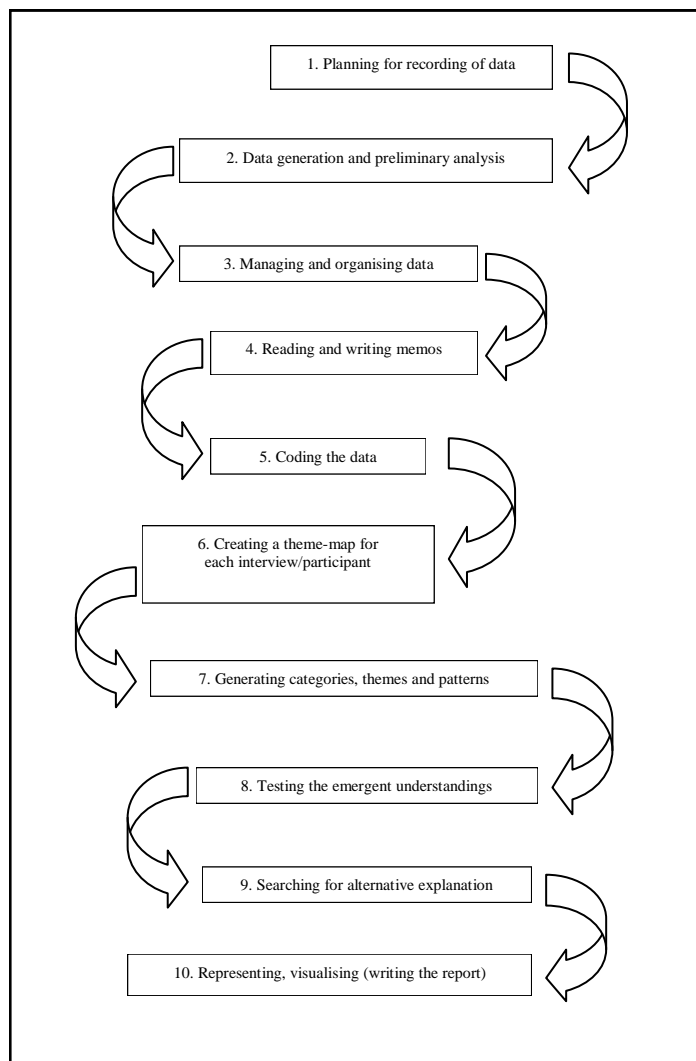
Figure 3: Spiral of qualitative analysis (adapted from Creswell, 1998)

3.4.3.1 Planning for recording of data

During this phase of the research I recorded my data by interviewing participants in a setting in which they felt comfortable. To prepare for the interview possible questions and areas of discussion were considered. Secondary data-gathering techniques and possibilities were also explored. During the interview I recorded our conversations

using a digital voice recorder and participants also had the option to send me their personally written stories via e-mail or share relevant artefacts or photos if they so wished. I collected e-mails, photos and drawings during the data generation process.

3.4.3.2 Data generation and preliminary analysis

After the data generation procedure had been completed the interviews needed to be transcribed. Transcriptions were done by a company due to lack of time for completing the transcriptions myself. Before transcriptions were completed the research participants were contacted for their permission and informed of the subsequent implications. The company provided a letter of assurance that data would be used with respect and information kept confidential - the letter can be seen in Appendix 1.

Data generation and analysis go hand-in-hand, making both important aspects of this step. I used thematic analysis and coding to analyse the qualitative data, through analysing transcribed interviews, photos, letters, e-mails, field notes and other relevant data generated.

3.4.3.3 Managing or organising the data

I organised my data according to the transcribed notes and secondary data gathered in each interview/session. I kept a research diary and attempted to keep relevant documentation in a research file. In representing the data some pieces needed to be moved into chronological order and were organised this way in the representation thereof, instead of as participants sharing the data during interviews.

3.4.3.4 Reading and writing memos

After the transcriptions were completed I immersed myself in the data and listened to the interviews while checking the transcriptions completed by the company. While going through the data in this way for the first time, I attempted to identify sections of data that "jumped out" at me (I highlighted these data pieces). I became aware of various systems and subsystems that played a part in participant's lives. I wrote memos as I read through the data and started my analysis trying to make sense of it all. I continued to keep a research diary throughout my data generation and analysis, in addition to secondary data, providing reflections and helping to extend the database and support the primary data gathered. I then returned to my data once more and read through the interviews again identifying pieces of data and themes that were relevant to my research questions and that would help streamline and validate what I had already become aware of. I also scrutinised my secondary data and identified possible themes.

3.4.3.5 Coding the data

Coding data is the formal representation of analytical thinking (Marshall & Rossman in De Vos et al. 2005). Throughout the coding process I had to be aware of new insights that might arise, resulting in adaptations and changes to my interpretation of the text. Morse and Richards (2002) also warn against coding just for the sake of getting through the data and I focused on coding the data which were needed for the study in order not to create an unnecessary backlog of data. I numbered each line and as I read through highlighted the relevant data segments for relevant pieces of data. I then read through the document identifying themes and important elements. A record

was kept on separate pages documenting which lines were relevant to which themes/elements in the research study as can be seen in Appendix 2.

Detour

At this point in the research study I felt overwhelmed. I had gone through the data and had begun to see how rich the provided information provided truly was. Here I became engulfed by how vast the interpretations could become if I did not focus only on what it was that I wanted to answer. At first I identified and highlighted various parts of data that caught my attention and could be linked to literature focussed on coming out or on various other topics such as "gay image in society", "reactions to wedding announcements of lesbian couples" or "the different reactions based on butch vs. femme personas" (see Appendix 3). However this was too broad and I attempted to reorganise my data into more relevant categories. I then focussed separately on each system identified or mentioned by participants and any themes that emerged from the data (see Appendix 4). Again it was too broad. The data allowed for a vast number of themes to be identified both relevant and irrelevant to the research study.

I then decided to return to my research question, which had somehow been lost in all the data. After focussing on the research question and aims of the research study I focussed only on the data relevant in the light of what I was researching. Data reduction formed an integral part of the process. I did not delete or eliminate data, but rather chose to focus only on the relevant data bits and themes that could be utilised to answer my research questions. With my purpose and aim fresh in my mind I moved on to the next phase of the data analysis process.

3.4.3.6 Creating a theme-map for each participant

In my research study I found it helpful to re-organise my data for each participant into a relevant theme-map to illustrate the various themes (identified through coding) as they relate to each individual's unique journey and to emphasise the systemic influences and interplay in this experiential process (see Appendix 5). Richmond (2002) utilised a similar technique (story-map) in his narrative research and I felt that it would compliment both the analytical and representational phase of my research. This provided me with a way to organise my data analysis and draw comparisons. I analysed secondary data and included the relevant themes in the theme-map. To me the maps represented a holistic way of organising and viewing the relevant themes collected. The map was organised in table format as is shown below:

Table 3: Example of theme-map

	Before Disclosure	*Systems*	Act of disclosure	*Systems*	After disclosure	*Systems*
Participan						

I had to consider various aspects before deciding on this format for organising the data. The perspective of *time* plays an important part of coming out as it is not seen as a singular event or happening, but as a process that was discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

I view the process as part of the temporal space, which forms part of narrative inquiry, as discussed by Connelly and Clandinin (2000) where they connect the temporal (past, present and future) dimension in research with Dewey's (1983, as cited in Connelly & Clandinin, 2000) belief that experience is continuous, thus experience can never be viewed or explained purely by a singular moment. Each experience we have is cultivated from a prior experience and becomes part of the next one (Rushton, 2004). This understanding of experience placed in a time continuum assisted me in making sense of my data. I chose to view the coming out/disclosure process in terms of before, during and after as shown above. This again echoes the temporal dimension discussed by Connelly and Clandinin (2000) as part of their three-dimensional narrative inquiry space.

Case study method with elements taken from narrative inquiry allows the possibility of understanding how personal and social spaces are entwined over time in the lives of participants (Clandinin, 2006). The interaction between the personal and social spaces allows for the various systems and their interactions involved in the case to be shown clearly. Individual experiences are never seen or formed in isolation, but rather shaped by the larger social, cultural and institutional narratives within which they happened (Clandinin, 2006). This forms part of Connelly and Clandinin's (2000) second criteria, personal/existential, of narrative inquiry in terms of Dewey's (1983 as cited in Connelly & Clandinin, 2000) beliefs that exchange takes place between a person's inner self and the surrounding world. This echoes my view of coming out as having two parts: coming out to self (inner self) and coming out to others (the surrounding world). This is how I added the systems to my way of organising the data, including not only the individuals' experience, but interactions from the surrounding world and other individuals as well.

3.4.3.7 Generating categories, themes and patterns

During this phase I identified larger categories of themes already identified, re-read the data to ensure that I had an accurate understanding of the data and included all relevant information. I then identified the systems involved in not only the interviews, but secondary data and ensured that all were included in the theme-maps. I so emphasised the interplay of elements in the coming out journey's multiple levels.

3.4.3.8 Testing the emergent understandings

De Vos *et al*. (2005) mentioned that during this phase it was necessary to determine how useful the data was against the backdrop of the theoretical framework and current literature. This would ensure that irrelevant data be excluded. As I examined the data with the systems theory as my theoretical framework, I found that the complexity of each individual's process was indeed represented by the data. Furthermore by identifying the systems involved in

each individual's journey, the systemic perspective and interplay was shown clearly. I attempted to remain ever aware of the interplay between the participants' experiences with one another, as well as systems identified by individual participants in their own experiential journey.

Detour

In the last two phases of data analysis mentioned above I began considering the question "How to represent the data?" Utilising the categories identified in the research and both representing/showcasing and discussing them appropriately was not a simple task. I agree with Lubbe (2005) that each human life consists of a unique and forever unrepeatable sequence of experiences and so events can never be repeated or be represented exactly as they were − either to oneself or to others. No matter how prised or significant a situation or event is, it can never truly be captured as it was. The aim of my research study was not to generalise findings, but rather to explore the unique experiences of significant individuals.

While the interpretive nature of qualitative research attempts to make sense of phenomena in terms of the meanings that people attach to them, the way people experience the world is a product of both the world-as-it-is in reality and by the unique manner in which people process their own experiences (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999:124,157). As a researcher I entered each new interview as an individual engaged in my own life, shaped by my past and present interactions, assumptions and experiences, in a sense, living my life story. Participants are also living their lives, and in my research study it was their experience of a part of their life story that I was investigating. Clandinin and Connelly (1990 as cited in Clandinin & Connely, 2000) following Dewey, mention that their principal interest in experience is the growth and transformation in the life story that we as researchers and our participants author. Lubbe (2005) states that because human reality is mutually and socially constructed and presented, we encounter a diversity of interpretations in the world, each person constructing meaning from their experiences internally and in interaction with others. Because each human being processes reality from a constellation of different viewpoints, it is foreseeable that no two people will experience the world in the same way (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999:124). Unique and lost experiences could only truly be shared by the participants themselves. For me the research would also lose depth and rich descriptions if the unique journey of each participant was merely reduced to a table of categories. I therefore chose to write a narrative for each participant in the first person.

Utilising first person narratives to represent the data gathered seemed the best way to allow the data generated to be represented correctly. The different systems involved in the process could be shown as well as each unique experience. Retelling the story from various perspectives and with varying degrees of intensity would allow readers to gain access to each participant's experience in the most authentic manner. As Clandinin and Connelly (1990 as cited in Clandinin & Connely, 2000) state difficult as it may be to tell a story, the more difficult but important task is the retelling of stories that allow for growth and change. I utilised the theme maps construed as well as the

categories to construct first person narratives. Writing about the experience of another is not an easy task as only they are ever truly certain of their own felt and lived through experience. In writing the stories I attempted to utilise exact wording where possible to allow the stories to be told in the authentic voices of the participants, enabling them to communicate and present their own experiences in the research study.

Considering the case study research, I opted to start with the *core narrative* of the couple, Allison and Leigh, as these are the narratives around which the experiences of significant others were construed. I chose to include their stories, they were not the main research participants, but the experiences of others can be understood in the context of their separate and joined coming out journeys. If not for Leigh and Allison's disclosure the experiences would have been unlikely to occur. Moving outward from the individual's experience, stories were constructed moving from the centre of the system outwards. I wrote the stories of significant others to be viewed individually as unique experiences and yet together in context of the coming out process of Leigh and Allison.

My next task was at hand - Constructing first person narratives. I am assuming that no two realities constructed by individuals can ever be exactly alike and that each experience is unique. Each individual creates a reality with various meanings given to experiences and interactions, which they see as perfectly "real" and true. I attempted to represent the experience of each participant as truthfully as possible. Connelly and Clandinin (2000) discuss in their third dimension of narrative inquiry *place*. They state that place has a special influence as virtually everything changes in some significant measure as narratives unfold in different places. Clandinin and Connelly (1990 as cited in Clandinin & Connely, 2000) also mention that we enter the research field in the midst of participants living their stories. Their lives do not begin the day we arrive nor do they end as we leave. Their lives continue. Furthermore, the places in which they live and work, their systems and their communities, are also in the midst when we researchers arrive. Therefore I do not expect the various personal narratives to have the same focus. Different places, times and interactions will hold different meanings for participants. The personal narratives are written where and when the participants placed their focus at this time.

I utilised the constructed theme-maps as story maps. Each map contained relevant information acquired from my data. The data were re-organised chronologically and not merely shown as it was re-told during the interviews. Not all information shared in the interviews was added in the narratives. Irrelevant data (data not specifically related to the research questions) was excluded. Working from the relevant data and remaining aware of various systems as well as the interplay between participants was where I truly became aware of what Clandinin and Connely (1990 as cited in Clandinin & Connely, 2000) meant when saying that thinking about an inquiry in narrative terms allows us to conceptualise the research process and experience as storied on several levels.

The interviews were conducted in Afrikaans and therefore the translation of quotations was done. Writing the stories was an extension of the analysis process, listening to the interviews and immersing myself in one interview at a time, helped me to hold on to the participant's voice and experience. I needed to reshuffle some of the data to make

chronological sense and not just utilise it as was shared in the interviews. The theme maps compiled also assisted me as a researcher to represent the experience as well as the themes and meanings conveyed by the participants during the interviews and secondary data generation process. Here I agree with Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999: 381) when they state that doing interpretive research always involves a circular movement between the general and the specific. I attempted to move between the holistic tone and themes of the interview to specific quotes and accounts given by research participants in the form of stories they had written so that stories were systemically constructed from theme-maps, interview data, secondary data gathered and categories identified (Appendix 6).

Writing the first person narratives meant that I had to view the information collected from the interviews holistically utilising participants' own words, stories of events and experiences communicated. Utilising the identified themes and categories, while writing the first person narratives of my participants, provided me with a way of adding depth and richness to the theoretical dimension of the study. These categories were discussed and in themselves linked to relevant research and literature. In the representation of the data I attempted here to link up with the statement of Terre Blanch and Durrheim (1999:381) when they mention that the outcome of research is usually represented in both theoretical and general terms, but that it is at the same time an account of a particular experience. This was a challenging task, but made easier as I knew that I would return to my participants after completing the stories and have them confirm the represented experience. In this way they would be given a chance to validate my re-telling of their experiences.

3.4.3.9 Searching for alternative explanations

I constantly challenged myself and reflected on the process in discussions with my supervisor to verify and explain the themes and categories that emerged from the research process. I returned to literature to support the themes and explain the emergent categories and streamlined the categories into the relevant experiences I wished to discuss (see Appendix 7). Finally I also utilised member checking to ensure that each individual's process and experience was represented correctly, according to the participants themselves. This was nerve-wracking as participants could change my research by commenting on what I had interpreted from the data. Although this would ensure the accuracy of the representation of experience, I was also hoping that they would not want to exclude any part that I felt to be crucial or important. During this phase I also re-iterated the ethical considerations in interaction with participants to ensure that they were aware of all their options.

3.4.3.10 Representing, visualising (writing the report)

During this final phase, I presented the data in a suitable way. As discussed earlier I utilised elements from narrative designs which grew and evolved as the research study progressed. I chose to represent the data in the form of stories as part of my own way of *making sense of the experience* and to represent the participants' authentic and unique experiences. With the aid of various theme-maps, reorganisation and analysis strategies, identified aspects and experiences could be compared or incorporated where necessary and data integrated. The relevance of the data is reflected in Chapter 5 where larger theme categories are discussed. In Chapter 5 the usefulness and applicability of the data gathered in my research becomes evident as seen against the backdrop of

my theoretical framework and the current literature based on the subject. Relevant common and unique experiences were also discussed against the backdrop of relevant literature.

3.5 Role of the Researcher

My subjectivity as researcher played an important role during qualitative studies as my ability to interpret and make sense of what I saw as critical and the researcher was seen as an instrument in the process (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Due to the nature of this research study and the paradigm and research design chosen as researcher, I was involved in the process. I did not stray beyond the boundaries of the research, but rather interacted with the participants and attempted to understand their reality and experiences. As researcher I interacted with the participants during interviews, informal conversations and via electronic mail and phone conversations. I remained professional and ensured that participants were informed of the expectations, limitations and possible benefits of the study throughout. I saw ethical conduct as part of my role as researcher.

I had to be aware of my own limitations and possible influences which could lead to biases. I am a white, Afrikaans, middle class, female researcher who embarked on a journey to research the experiences of significant others during the coming out process. I am aware that middle class, white, Afrikaans culture is often viewed as conservative and took great care not to impose biases on the data generated. The participants in the research study are also white, middle class, Afrikaans individuals and our backgrounds are therefore similar. As researcher I was careful not to make assumptions based on the perception of a shared culture or heritage.

The fact that I am not a lesbian also made me aware that I was an *outsider looking in* on the journeys of my participants. I rely solely on their experience as I do not have my own coming out experience as background. One of the advantages hereof, is that I can attempt to learn purely from my participants experiences and research and so be seen having a clean slate for examining research without specific past personal experiences which may interfere. I was also aware that I needed to be careful to ensure that I did not make assumptions based on what I read in researching literature or suspected the experience to be like, but rather attempted to ensure the adequate representation of the participants' experiences.

After generating the data I attempted to obtain a level of accuracy of presentation through analysing the data, applying crystallisation to my findings and involving several other researchers in the process. Keeping rigour of study intact was also part of my role as researcher. I discuss the quality criteria implemented to ensure that the rigour of the study remains intact in the next section.

3.6 Quality Criteria

The disadvantages of narrative and case study design imply that the results are not easily generalised (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999 and Huberman & Miles, 2002) as they only apply to the specific case on which the study

focuses. To generalise findings is not the purpose of this research study and it will not be a hindrance as I aim to explore the experiences associated with this one case, through the experiences related to me by various participants in the research study.

3.6.1 Trustworthiness

Throughout the research study I made use of crystallisation, which involved the convergence of information from multiple data sources with the aim of deriving conclusions. This entailed the identification of emerging themes across a variety of data sources (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). Crystallisation enabled me to integrate and analyse my data through a process that would help with the identification of relevant themes and possible meanings. It also allowed me the space within which my ideas grew and adapted to new information and interpretation of data. During the data gathering process and research I reflected on issues which arose from my research diary. I reflected on interviews and new data or meanings. I kept electronic reflections, notes and memos in my research diary as a way to ensure trustworthiness and integrity.

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2006) mention possible problems with the cross-checking of data resulting in possible bias, subjective, personal or selective results. Case studies are also susceptible to problems of observer bias. I therefore took measures to combat this using multiple data-gathering techniques and the involvement of several researchers to verify my findings. Nieuwenhuis (2007b) mentions that involving several investigators or peer researchers to assist with the interpretation of data improves the trustworthiness thereof and it led me to utilise this strategy as well.

3.6.2 Credibility

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2006) view credibility as a fit between what researchers' record as data and what actually occurs in the natural setting that is being researched. Credibility may be found in the use of various instruments for data gathering, several researchers, perspectives and interpretations emulating a degree of crystallisation as mentioned earlier. I applied more than one method of data gathering. Several researchers were involved in the analysis of data and I considered the case from multiple perspectives. The level of credibility was enhanced in this way. After the interpretation of data I reported the findings to my participants to ensure that they were comfortable with the results that were to be published. This also allowed them an opportunity to validate my interpretation of their experiences and so an additional measure of credibility was added.

3.6.3 Dependability

The concept of dependability emphasises the need for the researcher to account for the ever-changing context within which research occurs (Trochim, 2006). Research is responsible for describing the changes that occur in the setting and phenomenon chosen for the study and how these changes affect the way the research approached the study (De Vos, 2002; Trochim, 2006). The dimension of time was included in my research study as the experience (the phenomenon chosen for my research study) of participants has been through a process (passage of time). I

have reflected in my research study on changes or worries observed as well as looked to various data sources to triangulate my findings. Throughout the research study I conversed with other researchers and my supervisor when necessary. By utilising member checking at the end of my study I also afforded the participants the opportunity to inform me of any changes they would like and to verify the dependability of my findings as it is their experience I wished to represent.

3.6.4 Conformability

De Vos (2002) states that conformability captures the traditional concept of objectivity. Trochim (2006) adds to this by mentioning that conformability refers to the degree to which the results could be confirmed or corroborated by others. Qualitative research, however, tends to assume that each researcher brings a unique perspective to the study. In the research study as interpretive researcher and within the qualitative design I acknowledged that I cannot be seen as apart from my research, that as researcher I formed part of the process. In the research I have attempted to ensure conformability through triangulation of research findings from various data sources and by reflecting on my own process in my research diary as I returned to the data on multiple occasions, examining the themes having been identified.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

During the research study I fulfilled the role of researcher and as such I conducted myself in an ethical manner and adhered to the ethical code as stipulated by the University of Pretoria and the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA). Throughout the research study I **informed** all participants what was expected of them; **explained** my role to participants and relevant role-players; **discussed** issues of confidentiality, anonymity and possible strengths and limitations involved in the research before conducting the research; **informed and reminded** participants of their voluntary participation; **attempted** to foster a warm and accepting environment throughout the study; **explained** and discussed the research process to relevant individuals and **analysed** and interpreted the data responsibly and gave feedback to relevant parties.

In the research study I also considered the issues related to **trust**, **informed consent**, **safety in participation** and **privacy** as discussed below.

3.7.1 Trust

During the course of the research study and its published outcomes, the participants were not subjected to any form of deceit or betrayal. As researcher I strove to foster an honest and mutually trustworthy relationship with the participants. This proved to be a challenge as the subject which I addressed during the interviews was a sensitive matter and not always easy to talk about or to share past experiences. The subject was aimed at experiences, which could have been bad or good. As the research suggests, it could have been a trying and difficult time for the participants. I attempted to remain aware of this fact and managed my relationship with the participants

accordingly. I endeavoured to gain their trust and to ensure that my data were correct. I also maintained a professional relationship that reflected that of researcher and participant and not that of therapist and client. This was difficult for me as a practising Educational Psychologist and I reflected on this in my research diary as well as discussed the challenges with my supervisor, to ensure that the necessary trust was maintained as well as an appropriate professional relationship.

3.7.2 Informed consent

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2006) offer the following 6 guidelines for reasonably informed consent:

1. A fair explanation of the procedures to be followed and their purpose.
2. A description of the attendant discomforts and risks reasonably to be expected.
3. A description of the benefits reasonably to be expected.
4. A disclosure of appropriate alternative procedures that might be advantageous to the participants.
5. An offer to answer any inquiries concerning the procedure.
6. An instruction that the person is free to withdraw consent and to discontinue participation in the project at any time without prejudice to the participant.

As researcher I abided by these guidelines to ensure that reasonably informed consent was attained from all participating parties. The research process and other relevant information mentioned before, were explained and discussed and a letter of informed consent provided through an introductory conversation with participants. As the researcher I read the letter to the participants and answered any questions which arose as well as discussed the relevant information and issues as needed. I also made it clear that the participants could withdraw their informed consent and participation at any stage during the study. The participants were asked to sign the letter of informed consent after reading the document.

3.7.3 Safety in Participation

The research did not involve activities which would place the participants in any danger or physical harm. The content discussed was of a personal and intimate nature and therefore I proceeded with sensitivity and caution. When necessary I provided participants with contact numbers of a registered professional who could provide support should they need a therapeutic relationship to explore their experiences further.

3.7.4 Privacy

The confidentiality and anonymity of participants involved in the research study were protected as far as possible. It will not be possible to link the information used in the published outcomes to them. This included using false names, removing personal information which could identify the participant from the data and any other means to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the participant as far as possible.

A unique consideration in the study was that I had to be sensitive to the concerns and privacy of various participants. During the research study information might have come to the fore that had not previously been discussed among participants and that could impact on the relationships between them in a negative manner. I provided feedback to the participants before final publication. This ensured that only information they wished to share was included in the final research study and they had the opportunity to censor any information they did not wish to have included. When issues arose that participants felt they wished to explore further or share with their family members I provided them with suitable referrals. This was an ongoing concern of the research study and I remained aware of this throughout.

Through the collaborative process of the data generation strategies, a therapeutic release might have been experienced by the participants through re-telling their story and sharing the meaning gained from the situation. It could also have provided participants with a feeling of purposefulness as the benefits included sharing their journey or experiences with other individuals currently going through the same thing (individuals who may gain access to the research study). Although the experience of various role-players was explored, no therapeutic assistance was offered. As the topic was sensitive for the role-players to talk about past difficulties and unresolved feelings came to the fore. In this instance I encouraged them to seek therapeutic assistance with a registered professional.

3.8 Concluding Remarks

I began this chapter by discussing the research paradigm I had utilised. I elaborated on and discussed the research design and methods used for data gathering and analysis. I also explained the ethical considerations and quality criteria that I endeavoured to reach and adhere to throughout the research study.

In the following chapter I represent the results of my research study in the form of narratives whereafter in Chapter 5 a more detailed discussion of the various themes follows.

Chapter 4: Data Presentation: Personal Narratives

4.1 Introduction

This chapter[2] showcases the experience of the participants involved in this research study as related by them through interviews and personal narratives collected. The first person narratives of individuals, a couple, parents and a friend are included in this chapter. The chapter shows how significant others experienced the coming out process, before, during and after disclosure, a process representing a dimension of time in experience, as discussed in Chapter 3. They viewed the process not only from their own point of view, but also talked about their perceptions of others. Each participant started their story where they joined the process (as indicated below) and adding their voice to the systemic understanding of experiences of significant others. Each individual's journey is unique and different events and experiences were emphasised in their stories. Reflective looks back to the past, interactions in the present and hopes and fears of the future, differ and so each individual's experience and reality is represented as they viewed it. It cannot be otherwise because our social and personal realities are constructed by us (whether deliberately or incidentally) by the collection of changing/shifting meanings that make up our different realities (Mason, 2002; Schwandt, 2000 as cited in Lubbe, 2005: 150).
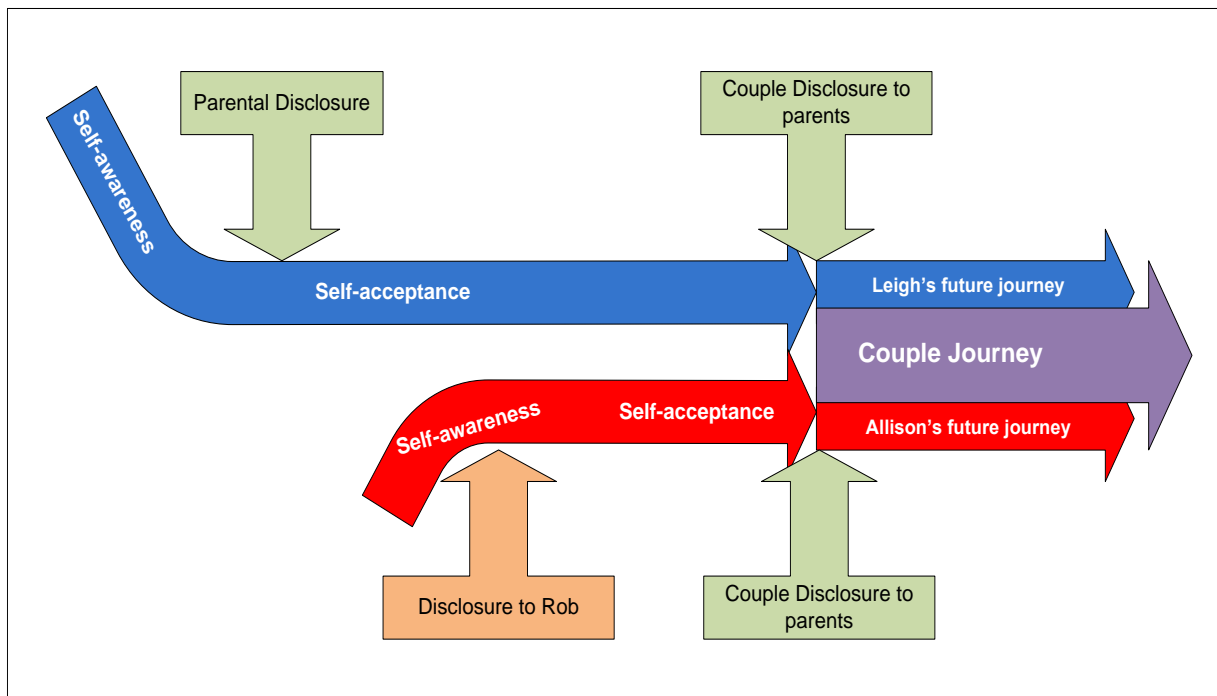
Figure 4: Representation of where participants joined the process

I finished my literature review and then immersed myself in my own research data. The process shown in the diagram above is my way of conceptualising the flow of events. The individual's journey of self-awareness to self-acceptance shows their coming out to self as described by Anhalt and Morris. The decision to come out to others

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[2] Only minimal editing was applied to this chapter to maintain the integrity of the data.

then follows and the act of disclosure is the outcome of this decision. Coming out to others as described by Anhalt and Morris (1998) in Chapter 2 is part of the coming out process. This is why I have included the management of reactions as a reference to the time following disclosure to show the experiences (good/bad) and their effect on the system. Finally, as can be seen in Floyd and Bakeman (2006), coming out can never be seen as truly over. This sentiment was also supported by my own research participants and therefore including possible future disclosures felt natural.

4.2 Meeting the Participants Involved

Throughout the study I have referred to participants but they are the individuals involved in the study. I have met with them and heard their stories. By listening to their stories I have been able to gain a clearer understanding of their experiences of the coming out process.

Leigh and Allison were participants group one, the focus of this research study was however on participant group two as they are the focus of my research question. I chose however to include their journeys and experiences in the research study. They can be viewed as the context and core journey from where the reactions of significant others (participant group two) can be viewed and understood. They are included in the table below where participants are introduced:

Table 4: Research participants

Participants	Description:	
Leigh *Allison*	They shared both their individual stories and their journey together as a couple with me.	*Married couple*
Bronwyn *Chris*	They share their experiences of Leigh as she grew up, their experience of her struggle and growth through the years as they saw it as well as their own experience, challenges and acceptance.	*Leigh's parents*
Debra	Sharing her own reaction, experience, questions as well as cognitive and emotional reaction to the disclosure of her daughter.	*Allison's mom*
Rob	Her shares his personal experience of the process from the stance of Allison's confidant and now both Allison and Leigh's friend.	*Friend*

4.5 Participant's Stories

Story Number 1

Leigh's and *Allison's* stories intertwined

Leigh:
Being gay - is it a single moment where everything just becomes clear? No, for me it was a growing awareness and acceptance of myself and who I am. Part of growing up and figuring out all the quirks and issues attached to my

own self-confidence and self-image. My journey started when I was in Grade 10 and although I am not a talkative person, I will share my story as best I can...

In Grade 10 the realisation hit me "I am gay", However this was not an *idea* that I wanted to pay particular attention to. I was not at all comfortable with the idea of being gay; that had taken hold of my mind. I also didn't want to hurt my family, and this *idea* was something that to me seemed difficult to share with anyone without it being upsetting. At school I still felt a need to fit in or at least be accepted by the larger group of children. Being part of the norm is something I knew would be easier in the long run and I still felt somewhat unsure of myself. The *idea* however didn't leave me and I began thinking of it more and more. As time passed the *idea* grew into something more tangible and in Grade 11 I decided to take the next step and share the news that I had slowly been growing accustomed to, over the past year, with my best friend - that I am gay. Her reaction was nothing dramatic, nothing earth shattering. She just told me that it was okay. I was very surprised by the fact that her behaviour towards me didn't change and she still treated me the same as she had before. I had finally shared the news that I had been carrying around alone for a whole year with someone, and I felt a great sense of relief. I told someone that I am gay and the world did not come crashing down. However although I felt relief at having shared the news with someone. I was also still trying to make this fact, the fact that *I am gay - okay* to myself, and at times this was not an easy task.

Wanting to fit in with the rest of high school is something every teenager wants and conforming to group standards; complying with expected norms to not be left standing out in the cold ("wearing billabong shirts like everyone else and not a PEP shirt") were expected. I was starting to feel pressure by this. The strain of fitting in with the norm interfered with my own self-acceptance and with how I perceived my *okayness* in society. I didn't feel comfortable with all aspects of myself, as I am sure very few teenagers do, and I showed this to others, but not by talking, because as I said; "I am not a talkative person", but through my actions and through my appearance. I have never quite fitted in, always feeling like the outsider, different in some way. I always seemed to be in some sort of trouble, nothing serious, but still trouble. I saw this was one way to assert my *differentness*, not by openly dating women, but by small signs of rebellion, starting to reveal my true self. At this stage of my life I didn't use overt ways to demonstrate my individuality, but small accepted rebellious actions. My age and limited life experience were also factors that held me back, although I thought that others suspected that I was gay, because of my *image* and appearance, deciding to themselves that I *looked gay*; however I was not yet ready to confirm their judgements of me.

Allison: *She's not exaggerating, she really isn't very talkative, that's more my style. She can sometimes come across as being very blunt and at times even rude. She's not a people person, and being judged is not something that is easy - you want to fit in and well...if you don't you need to be okay with that.*

Leigh:

Each June holiday I visited my grandmother and family in George and my Matric year was no exception. Visits to my Gran were special to me as we had always been close. I also felt very comfortable and close to my Aunt in whose flat my grandmother was staying. On this particular trip I had made another important decision - to come out to my aunt, and again the disclosure did not bring a dramatic reaction. Although I could see emotions play on her face, she also told me that it was okay and even went further to thank me, for trusting her enough to share this information with her. This was a special experience for me, not feeling rejected and having another person tell me that I was okay. Another positive reaction to the 'idea' that I had wanted to ignore at first and another assurance that I was okay. Slowly after the awakening of my own awareness of being gay I was growing towards acceptance of the person I am... not just my appearance, but my identity.

Allison: *She also told her aunt about me, but I think that was only later. Because I only met her a year or two after that...it was on another holiday - when Leigh shared with her aunt that she had met me.*

Leigh:

I started my university career and I started feeling more 'completely' okay with the fact that I was gay, a kind of "settling of the mind". I viewed this year as a new start, a time to start exploring and experimenting with my identity. I lived in a hostel with a few friends and we formed a tight group. In hostel however some degree of conformity was once again expected for me to be accepted into the group. I supposed there are always going to be places in life where you need to fit in to feel part. While in hostel I told one of my friends that I was gay and she asked me if she could tell the others. I realised then that I didn't mind people knowing that I was gay, but I didn't like telling them. Lacking some self-confidence, still feeling the need to conform and being dependent on the acceptance of others are factors that made it difficult for me to feel that I could come out to others comfortably. I didn't come out to many people. There were acquaintances from high school at university, not really friends, but individuals who had just always been there, that I didn't really tell, because I think they knew, I think they realised from my behaviour and my appearance and from growing up with me.

Allison: *Remember Leigh looks gay and that fact alone makes things different and a lot easier too, she doesn't need to fight the perception others have of "but you don't look gay". Other people often make the assumption that she is gay and then wait for her to confirm their assumption.*

Leigh:

I saw that once people became aware of the fact that I was gay, there were certain assumptions or perhaps I should say fears that became apparent, through their actions, after finding out. Some girls who in the past where *touchy types* now didn't touch me anymore when they spoke or hung out with us and if they did touch me they were sure to let me know, that it was truly an accident; others reacted in a way, where they thought that being gay meant that I was now in love with them, like being gay meant that I was attracted to all women. Subtle behavioural

changes also manifested after individuals became aware that I was gay, for example girls who in the past would change in front of me now went to change in the bathroom. I was however pleased to see that these changes in behaviour seemed to dissipate and behaviour returned to normal after people had had time to get used to the *idea*.

Allison: *I also realised this fact, it sort of makes you feel very much "out of the click". People are okay with you being gay, but it is like they all of a sudden don't know how to act around you. They become extra careful, just to make sure you are aware of their true intentions and don't take something up the wrong way. You know the changes are for you, but Leigh's right after a while they do go back to being normal.*

Leigh:

I started trying to gain entry into the gay/lesbian world, but I found that gaining access to this world was a difficult task. It is a very closed world and there were no specific hangouts, magazines or rule books that helped me gain access. Although I started to experiment with girls during my first year at university they were almost always known to me to be *out* in my hostel and not through a social network of gay/lesbian friends. I still don't have many lesbian/gay friends, but mostly socialise with straight friends. To me it seemed that in society the awareness and acceptance of gay men has progressed to a larger degree than the awareness and acceptance of gay women. It was and still is easier to spot a gay man walking down the street than to know whether a woman is gay, especially with the lack of social clubs or even literature aimed at this specific group of which I now formed a part.

Two years after Matric I relocated and started afresh in a new city with a different take on life. I didn't have the constraints of needing to fit in with any group of specific individuals as had been the case in school and at my previous university, in the hostel I resided in. I could now decide who I wanted to spend time with and I had the ability to choose my own friends. If I didn't like someone, I didn't have to put up with them, as here there was no need to. I didn't live with the people I studied with and didn't need to fit into any specific box or meet any specific set of criteria in order to be accepted. I had by now accepted that I was gay and my self-confidence had increased with my acceptance of this fact. The world did not need to give me the approval or acceptance as a sign that I was okay, I already knew this and I was ready to live my life. Being gay had never truly been just an idea, I had always been certain; however it took some time to make this fact *okay* to myself. It is who I am, not only one specific defining moment, but part of my identity something that gained awareness and grew through the years into something tangible and real, much like a straight person would gain awareness that they are attracted to the opposite sex... You know that you're gay and in the beginning it's 'shitty' but then you accept it and move on.

Allison: *I think the fact that she didn't have any friends or know anyone here made it easier for her. She arrived with who she was, whether you accept it or not. Because Leigh comes across as very blunt, this can be seen in the wrong light, but here she didn't need to please anyone.*

Leigh:

My extra bit of life experience and the fact that I was two years older than the other first-year students gave me somewhat of an advantage. I felt more settled and ready as I watched the bubbly faces filled with excitement and enthusiasm for the year ahead around me - fresh out of Matric. There is a big difference in being a third-year and being a first-year and I could spot it a mile away... We started attending classes and here I met Allison, one of the new bright eyed first years and instantly fell in love.

Allison: *I still remember the first time I met her. It was my first day at university. Never would I have imagined that the day I would graduate, I would leave there a different person. I was dressed in my comfortable yet stylish long-before-pre-planned outfit, perfect hair and a bit of mascara, not wanting to look too over the top on my first day. I was a bit late for my first lecture and looked around for the closest seat available, not to attract any attention to my tardiness, not realizing how my current seating arrangement would affect my future. We were seated in groups, my group consisting of all girls, mostly just out of school, prissy, giggly and almost fearful, except for one girl. She sat right next to me and I must in all honesty say that I did a bit of a double take. She looked more like a 16-year-old boy than a 20 something girl. Her head was shaved; she wore baggy clothes and had a strange boyish posture even though she had fine features.*

I introduced myself to everyone, but tried to avoid too much interaction with my direct neighbour. She scared me. I suppose we are all programmed this way. To be fearful of the different, the unexplained or actually anything that falls outside of our comfort zone. Why I don't know? I suppose it is a defence mechanism, a self-preservation handed down from generation to generation.

That afternoon I went home crying. I was alone and missed my friends. I had entered unknown territory - a world of new people, people that I couldn't imagine seeing myself growing old with or even have the slightest thing in common with. How would I survive what was supposed to be the greatest years of my youth, with these people, especially my weird neighbour? At the time my first day was the worst day of my life. My mother comforted me and explained that this would be good for me; to grow, to meet new people and to expand my horizons. I was not enthusiastic, but couldn't argue, it was worth a try.

I made a conscious decision to try and make the best of my situation. As the weeks passed, to my surprise, friendships started to form and I found myself part of a new group of friends realising that I had gotten worked up for nothing, but one girl in particular I had not yet figured out. I always prided myself in being a great judge of character and figuring people out after my first impression, but my class neighbour puzzled me. Her name was Leigh.

She was a mystery, not only to me, but to the rest of the group as well. We all had our theories and explanations, but no one had any truths. The only thing that we knew, or actually, we as a group had decided on was - she was a lesbian. This frightened and intrigued me at the same time and so I decided to embrace her.

Leigh:

We were a group of girls who hung out together at class and one day during a smoke break I shared with them that I was *into girls*, for me the disclosure was meant to be very nonchalant and not something that I had planned as a grand moment of coming out. However I laughed to myself when I saw the shock reflected on the faces around me and everyone talking over each other about how many gay friends they had. All the while I knew that none of them had any gay friends, but I appreciated the gesture, realising that this was their way of telling me that it was okay and their attempt to ensure me of their support. We all walked back to class together in semi-silence, after working for a few minutes I needed something from my toolbox and when I looked up 5 minutes later, the entire group had rushed outside for another smoke break, leaving me behind. I smiled to myself as I knew they had left to go gossip and discuss the *shocking* information I had revealed earlier. This didn't bother me at all, by now I had learned that people needed to talk about it and discuss it to deal with it. After all in the beginning even I wanted to ignore the *idea*.

Allison: *Yes, Leigh came out with a bang! We were all talking about how she just threw it out there, right in the middle of our conversation - just sort of blurting it out. She started telling us about her weekend and the girl she had met and how great a kisser she was. Not too much detail but still enough for us to be stunned. She then walked into class leaving us to rant and rave about what just happened and why she suddenly dropped this on us. We always knew she was a lesbian, but she had never said it in so many words. We just assumed that our pre-judgements were correct, because of the way she dressed, the way she acted and her mannerisms. It is always strange how your perception changes after a suspicion has been confirmed, suddenly you are shocked about the reality of it all. We always knew it. But now it was on the table, for everyone to comment, criticise and even learn from. When we finished our flash flood of gossip and shock we rushed into class. You could immediately feel a different atmosphere; a different tone was set in the group. Some were repulsed, some of us just ignored it and I was intrigued.*

I had never met a lesbian in my whole life. This was a first for me. Even though I grew up in an open-minded household and my parents had gay friends, this was my official first lesbian meeting. I saw this as quite an achievement, off course I told everyone. Everyone! I suppose I am a bit of a gossip queen, sometimes, but this was more than just gossip, this was a sort of distorted way of impressing people with the fact that I knew an actual lesbian and they didn't.

Later it dawned on me that Leigh telling us about her sexual orientation, in her blasé way, had meant that she opened the doors for us to stop speculating and at the same time she would not have to tell everyone and explain or answer questions, knowing that it would spread like wild fire once the bomb had been dropped. Cleverly done...

Leigh:

Allison told her friends about her gay friend, Leigh, in other words me and this made life much easier for me. She had done quite a bit of coming out for me and I cannot say that this bothered me. I didn't need to come out over and over to loads of different people and her friends knew what to expect when I met them, they already knew, no answering awkward questions about boyfriends, everyone just knew - this was great..

Allison: *Leigh was never a real people's person, and never let anyone get too close. She liked her own space; she followed her own mind and ways, she never conformed. I loved this about her. People always want to please others. Especially women, we try to fit into a crowd, we dress to impress, and we always want to be people pleasers, even some not knowing it.. Leigh was different. In a way I thought this was because she was a lesbian and this was maybe a lesbian code, to be different, to say your say and not to care. After long chats and loads of vodka, I realised that there was no such "lesbian code". However being a lesbian made you different in the public eye and because of this fact you needed to build a shield, you needed to become strong and to embrace the different. Otherwise where would you be, how would you cope - You needed thick skin.*

Leigh's thick skin made it difficult to introduce her to my old group of friends. We were a tight group together since kindergarten and to me they felt more like my real family than a group of friends. This would be the first lesbian they would meet. They were in a way not as inclined to be her friend as our university group was, still they were civil, and even later embraced her as our own. I think that the fact they could see how close we were and that we were each other's support system played a big part in this acceptance at first. We all became great friends even though we never entered her world. Unfair if I think about it now. She had to sit and listen to us go on and on about guys and hair and make-up and guys and relationship and guys, but we never really made an effort to go with her to a gay club. We told ourselves that - we would be in the way, I think it was more a question of us asking ourselves who would see us there, what would people think and how it might just be a bit too far outside our comfort zones.

We jumped into our second year of studies, but there was a feeling in the air that this will be the life-altering year. I was at somewhat of a cross roads in my life, realizing that what I always wanted in a boyfriend or, one day, in a husband, I now saw in Leigh. If I could turn her into a guy, she would be my soul-mate. At this stage I did not realise that it could be love. It was too much to

comprehend; it became more of a fascination or experimentation. I always debated the subject with myself: if you only ate apples your whole life and someone presented you with a pear. Why would you say no? Why not try the pear? It is still a fruit, just something you're not used to, something you have never tasted. How could you say no to something you have never tasted? How would you know if you have never tried it! So I realised that in some strange way I was changing. Not becoming a lesbian, but turning into the true open-minded person I always thought I was or strived to be. This realization scared me, but excited me at the same time, because now I knew that it would only be a matter of time until I started experimenting; and started trying some pears.

Leigh:

Student life continued and my feelings for Allison grew as time passed. By our second year of university I was *very much* in love with her. I know that something about being gay fascinated and intrigued Allison. We slowly grow closer to each other and developed a friendship that was very close. Eventually, one night, after knowing each other for quite some time, we kiss. The following day, awkwardness ensued and the day seemed long, but we worked through the awkwardness and it passed. We were then free to move on to the next stage, we kissed regularly. Although there was no talk of *commitment* or an exclusive relationship we had an understanding of how things worked. The kissing was a secret, our secret, something that bonded us together.

Allison: *I am a strong believer in the fact that alcohol makes you more susceptible for various propositions, but that it is never an excuse for your actions. I still know what I am doing when I'm drunk; it just takes less effort to persuade me. One day after class we all went out for cocktails and afterwards I took Leigh home. On the way there we talked a lot and the topic of kissing a girl came up. I always knew Leigh had feelings for me, everybody could see it. Maybe our friendship was also fuelled by me feeling flattered. A girl is always flattered when they know someone has feelings for her, even if you don't return those feelings, it's wonderful even if just to boost your ego. I was flattered, even more so that it was a girl who liked me, maybe even loved me.*

When she asked me if I had ever kissed a girl and I said "yes". To this day I don't know why. Maybe I wanted to impress her, or shock her or maybe I used it as an excuse to want more of this imaginary kiss. My weird unforeseen plan worked, as she was shocked and surprised, and asked me if I would do it again. The conversation in the car turned into a strange build up for when we would be kissing. We both instantly knew that this is going to become a reality, and sooner than later. We stopped in front of the house and she asked me in for some tea. Tea would now turn into something so different from the innocence it represented. I obliged and walked with her into the kitchen. Her roommate was home and joined us for this cup of tea and cigarette. As I sipped my tea, reality kicked in and when my cup was finished, I chickened out, said goodbye and went

home. It is strange how the anticipation of one kiss could become such a big deal in my mind. Just that one thought of kissing her turned my whole world upside down. I could not sleep that night, the adrenalin flooding through me after the close call kept me thinking and alert the whole night. What if it did happen? Would we still be good friends? Would it repulse me or would I like it? Would it stay at one kiss or would it become an obsession. Either way my life as I knew it had already changed. Now it was just a matter of when, where and how.

I stayed with a friend close to the student central, I had insisted on moving out even though my parents were only a few minutes away. Living on my own at that stage meant having freedom and some sort of independence, especially independence from my mom. Not really independence, more distance. We did not really get along and did not see eye to eye, maybe because we were so alike. I was tired of the fighting and the comparing and the pleasing. The flat was my escape, my neutral ground the place where everyone liked me and listened to me, a place where I could talk and just be. Even though Leigh, my roommate and I were like the three musketeers, my roommate was never truly as comfortable with Leigh as I was. So she always slept in my room. We would lie for in bed for hours talking about absolute nonsense.

One night Leigh, my roommate and I were out on the town drinking until past midnight. When returning to the flat tired and tipsy, we put on our pyjamas and retired to our rooms, Leigh sharing mine. Leigh and I just started dosing of when she started chatting; we talked for hours this time about more serious stuff. When suddenly she turned to me, looked me in the eye and asked if she could kiss me. Even though I had been wondering when this would happen, I was stunned! She floored me! I wanted this to happen, but could have never prepared myself for how I would feel, what would go through my head and how I would react. I giggled it off and said no. She did not take no for an answer. I could see in her eyes and she in mine that I wanted to, but felt unsure about if I should let it happen. She turned to me again and this time she did not ask, but rather told me that she was going to kiss me, now! My heart started beating so fast and I knew this was it. I uttered a yes and in slow motion her lips came closer and closer to mine. We started kissing. It was soft and smooth and strange at the same time. It had lasted only a few seconds when I pulled back and said "okay, now, I think we should go to sleep". She looked a bit disappointed but agreed and we tried to get some shuteye for the awkward day to come.

We were not that awkward at first, I suppose it was because we had a lot to do and we kept busy. When we got to class we stood outside having a cigarette with everyone before class, when one of our friends made a comment: "you two look guilty" instantly I turned tomato red and Leigh just muttered "why?". She added that we looked like we were up to something. We laughed it off, said she was insane and rushed into class. Now the awkwardness started, but inside I felt a bit

mischievous and fun. I kissed Leigh last night. It was only for a few seconds, but there was something in those few seconds.

That afternoon I was confused, scared and excited at the same time. The kiss happened, so unexpectedly, and I thought I would be prepared for it when it happened. I chickened out so quickly, but I could not help it and now I could almost not remember exactly how it had felt. How could I have had my first girl on girl kiss, and not remember details? Was it like a hallucination? I needed to do it again, I had to! I had to feel those few seconds again, maybe for some clarity, maybe to let my adrenalin rush again, I didn't know. It was like a drug, I wanted more. I typed a sms, rephrasing the message many times, I finally settled on "I want to kiss you again". In a matter of seconds I received a sms in return: "come over for some tea".

I ran around in the flat wondering what to wear, what to do. Leigh and I were so close and so open with each other and suddenly I felt like a little girl waiting on my birthday presents. I blow-waved my hair, put on make-up, dressed up, not too much, I still had to appear normal and relaxed. On the way there I became scared, still excited but so, so scared. I kept repeating one phrase over and over and over to myself: "what are you doing, what are you doing!" I think I turned around twice, but realised there was no getting out of this one, I wanted to go and she was expecting me to come! I had to go, for myself. I needed to go. So I took a deep breath, parked in front of her flat and went over to ring the bell. She took ages to open the door. I don't think she actually took so long, it just felt so flipping long to me. When she finally opened the door, it was an awkward "hello". We went into her flat, and although she made some tea, we couldn't really make mindless small talk as we had seen each other all day. So we sat down and started drinking our tea.

When I get nervous I start rambling, so I started rambling about the previous night and how I just wanted to try it, but I thought I wanted to kiss her again, because I could not get it off of my mind. She told me that she was shocked when she received my sms, totally flabbergasted and unexpected, but she was glad I sent it. I don't know who was more nervous; even though I was not the first girl she had ever kissed I think she felt the first-kiss-butterfly-feeling all over again. Half way through our cups of tea she said "okay, so are we going to kiss now?" Again, I hesitated, not because I did not want to, but just because I didn't know how to handle the situation. I was never good and confronting feelings and difficult or strange situations, a really bad characteristic to have right at that moment.

She then said that there were no two ways of going about this, so she prepared me by saying that she was going to put down her tea, switch off the light and sit down next to me on the bed. I said

okay and put down my tea. My heart was pounding. I was scared out of my mind and even sitting there knowing that this is it, no thoughts of retribution crossed my mind. She sat down next to me leaned over, put her hand on the side of my head, leaned even closer and we started to kiss. I've had my fair share of kissing, but this, this was unlike any kiss I had ever had in my entire 19 years of existence. It was soft and humble, slow but with an adrenalin rush, smooth and titillating. We had rhythm as if we were born to kiss each other. How could this one kiss be so much more than any other kiss? Nothing could compare to this one kiss...nothing! I was hooked! From then on, my drug of choice was Leigh.

After our official real first kiss nothing changed dramatically. We were still best friends; we just saw each other even more, we became even closer. We stole loads of secret kisses and touches in public, which was even more exciting, as we could get caught. We were having the time of our lives.

Leigh:

Allison and I spent a lot of time together. To me it seemed silly that no one suspected a relationship between us, no two friends spend that much time together or are that close. We did date other people while we had our secret kisses, but let me clarify the word *date* - we never had relationships, we had people who came into our lives and left, no real permanence attached to them. They were casual flings or one night stands. Allison with guys and me with girls, but our secret is a constant factor.

Allison: *What made our strange encounters more exciting was that no one knew. No one could even ever imagine me having any physical relationship with a woman. I was an outgoing person, the girly girl, the fashion expert, the best friend, and the kiss and tell girl. If I think back at the amount of time Leigh and I spent together, and everyone seeing how close we were, best friends, no one ever thought that we would be more than friends. This gave it such a high level of excitement, anything you do that is forbidden to do is an extra adrenalin rush and we had an adrenalin-secret that was ours.*

Leigh:

The next two years we grew closer, although no commitment was involved or mentioned I knew that I had true feelings for Allison and I knew that my heart was on the line and could be broken if this didn't work out. After more or less two years of being together and sharing secret kisses Allison also acknowledged that she had developed real feelings for me and we could talk openly about our feelings for each other. I know that she tried very hard to deny these feelings she felt, but was very happy when she realised that she could deny them no longer. At this time I had to move back home after finishing my studies, this made it difficult for me and Allison to see each other regularly so we planned visits at least once a month, keeping in touch. This was also a confusing time as we had

not as yet established clear *rules* for our relationship and we were not at this time exclusive. However during the time apart we told each other if we had kissed anyone else and we realised that when we shared these encounters, we were both prone to feeling jealous. We then decide to make it clear - No kissing other people, we are exclusive.

Allison: *We did not really have a relationship, okay, we did have a relationship, but it was definitely not your average relationship. No one knew about our secret and we still dated other people, me dating guys and she dating girls. I remember one specific night. I went out with Leigh and her new floozy (if I can call her that) and some of floozy's friends. I think they could immediately see the chemistry between Leigh and I as it was at times unavoidable. Leigh was sitting there pretending to engage in loving conversation with her new girl hand in hand on the table, but her other hand was under the table on my leg. We had a strange understanding of how our secret relationship worked, but it was a kind of naughtiness that made her hand on my leg so right for us at that moment. We often went to the bathroom together, as girls rarely go to the bathroom alone, but for us it was to steal some secret kissing time. We got away with a lot and even had a few close calls, but we always managed to talk ourselves out of it. I realised how naïve people were, but perhaps naïve is not the best word, however people don't expect one of their own to do such things, to go over to the other side.*

Our relationship grew more and more and over months became stronger. In my heart and mind I knew that this was not just silly flirting, that this was getting serious, but I chose to ignore it. I was going against the norm, but I loved it. We both knew that this "thing" we had would not last, we both thought that our infatuation with each other would pass and wondered - Then what? Leigh's feelings for me got stronger, I knew this, but chose to ignore it, as I was not yet ready to deal with my feelings. I did not know what I felt and what to do. As great as my relationship was with her, I was more confused than ever. I knew that taking this further would have consequences I was not ready for.

I also knew that the time had come for me to tell my secret to someone, as I could not keep such a significant happening in my life to myself any longer. I am your typical girl and I needed to talk about this. It was the one thing I could not talk to Leigh about and definitely not my parents. We didn't have that kind of a relationship. My close family was actually my group of friends. This was the one thing I needed the girls for, but I didn't know how they would react and so I decided for them that they were not yet ready to hear what I had to say. I then decided to use my second best option and confided in my gay friend. He had been my friend for about 6 years and had recently also come out of the closet. I remember that I was not shocked when he broke the news to me. When I think back I wonder if I did not see in him what I found in myself, the urge to experiment, the knowing that there was more to life and that feelings could not to be easily denied. So I went

to his house, armed with a bottle of wine, knowing that today was the day I lift some of the load I have been carrying.

He, on the other hand was shocked. To me it was weird that no one saw this coming. Well he was only shocked for a few minutes or so and then realised that he could not be too shocked by this. He knew that I was a very open-minded person; he also knew that Leigh and I were extremely close. He did not suspect that we were that close, but nevertheless he was supportive. It felt great to tell someone. Why I keep this from my closest friends, I don't know. I suppose I was scared of how they would react, if they would accept it and if they would continue treating me the same as always.

While we were talking he pointed something unexpected out to me in our tell-all conversation. Something I did not realise or maybe I was just trying to ignore it. He told me that I was falling in love with Leigh. Now it was my turn to be shocked. He explained that the way I talked about her, the way I treated her, the way my eyes flickered and shined, the way I got flustered and the way I smile when talking about her gave me away. Even the bit of jealousy I showed when talking about her other girls. I was not ready to face that emotion, not yet. I denied it, but could see that he was not buying my poor performance. After our conversation I felt liberated, but in a sense also more confused than ever, as I now knew I had true and permanent feelings for Leigh. I tried to ignore it, but such feeling you can't just turn on and off, even if you try.

Leigh and I got more and more involved and even became exclusive. We started doing "couple things", one in particular planning a romantic getaway. You would think after a year of sneaking around we would be comfortable with each other, but no. She came to pick me up for our romantic getaway weekend. All the way to our destination we were for some odd reason back to being awkward. Maybe it was because for the first time it was going to be just her and I, alone for a whole weekend, a real normal couple weekend where we do not have to sneak around and steal kisses. Going somewhere where no one knew us and we could be a normal couple in love.

When we arrived at our destination we unpacked. We both looked at each other and in unison said: "so are we ever going to kiss?". We realised that we were both wondering "when is she going to kiss me?". we laughed it off and started to kiss. That weekend went by so fast. I wished it would never end. We went for mountain walks, even for a swim, we did everything together cooked together, showered together, laughed together and we kissed. Our last night before reality would kick in we were having a romantic dinner outside, by candlelight. It was the perfect night.

After dinner we sat together in front of the bonfire outside, in awe of the flames. When I blurted out: I love you! She looked at me, as if she had been waiting for me to say that for a long time. I never realised what an impact those words could have. Those three words are said millions of times a day, in the movies on TV, by anyone. Never did I think these words, often so over used and so wrongly used could ever have such a great meaning. I truly meant what I said when I said those words. Not because it was the perfect setting, not because it was the perfect time, but because I needed to say it. I needed and wanted to say it to her, so I could show my true feelings and verbalise them and mean it! I don't think I have ever been as honest and true with anyone as when I said those three words: I love you! She did not even have to return those three words, even though I already knew that she has loved me for a long time, the expression on her face was enough for me. Now she knows too!

Leigh:

The following year I moved back and we continued our exclusive relationship. However we were still the only ones aware of this fact; no one else knew about us. Management of our relationship with me being *out* to everyone we knew and Allison not having disclosed to anyone was not a difficult task. Everyone we knew was already aware that I was gay and that we were very close friends. So no one suspected a relationship. I think that they just accepted that Allison had found a very good friend and confidant in me, her gay friend. We saw each other every day; I was working and Allison still studying, but our relationship grew. Another year passed, and Allison and I considered moving in together, but we then realised that we would have to come out to our parents, telling them that we were gay and that we were in a committed relationship. I think that our relationship played a big part in the decision to come out; if there was no relationship, there would be no *push*, no need to come out.

Allison: *We went on as usual, sneaking around, but now ending phone conversations with those three words shared at the end of the weekend we spent together! It was a wonderful feeling, except that it could not be shared with anyone. I suppose this was our own wrongdoing, but in a sense it was again self-protection. We lived in a world of rules and reputations, rules created by our own mothers, fathers, teachers, priests and politicians, even friends. However in retrospect, who are they, even though they are some of the most important people in our lives, who are they to decide. Who are they to decide how I should lead my life and who I should and should not love. This was a strange concept to grasp. But still I was not yet ready to take on this challenge. So we just kept on with our normal relationship, well normal for us. At this stage I was still studying and Leigh was a working girl. She moved into a commune and I went to live with my parents again. Well I just slept there a few nights of the week, the rest of the time I spent at Leigh's place. Sometimes even lying to my parents about where I was. I don't know why I lied. Most of the time they knew I was at Leigh's place the other times they thought I was at a friend's. I just tried to keep the peace.*

Holiday season came around and I went on holiday with friends, but I was smart, organising the holiday around Leigh's holiday, making sure that I would get to have some of the summer Oceanside-holiday with her. We arranged our plans to go stay with Leigh and her parents for a few days and then go to another friend's holiday home. On arrival I was so happy to see her, but I had to keep my emotions intact, not show too much. One night her parents went out to dinner and left all of us to do what we wanted. We went for a walk on the beach and returned to the house later for something to eat. Two friends went back to the beach to go look for something they lost in the sand, our other friend, Jessica, went to take a shower. Leigh and I were all alone and we took advantage of this opportunity to greet each other properly after not seeing each other for ages, when suddenly we heard a "Oh my God" in the background. It was Jessica, supposed to be in the shower. We had been tempting fate for too long. She had just came upstairs to find out what she was supposed to wear after the shower, what we were doing later, but now she just turned around and walked off, I ran to the bathroom in tears. What a way for her to find out. I was so angry, so emotional. Leigh came in to comfort me, but I just pushed her away and told her to go to Jessica. Jessica never saw this coming.

In a way I always thought people would put two and two together and figure it out on their own. We were like an old married couple sometimes, bickering and laughing, we even finished each other's sentences! How could our friends have been so blind? Later Jessica came into the bathroom and gave me a hug. I apologised for keeping this from her, but she just kept repeating "it's okay, it's okay". Luckily Leigh's parents didn't walk in on us. Jessica and I had a long overdue chat later that holiday. She told me that she never saw this coming, not for a second and that it would take her some time to get used to, but that she'd survive and that she knew I was still the same person.

This event triggered a long string of confessions to follow. We realised that we are just doing more harm not telling anyone about our relationship and so it began. One friend at a time; some shocked and some just waiting for me to finally confess, but before coming out to our friends, Leigh and I had done some preparation. I didn't want a repeat of Jessica's experience. We started preparing our friends, in small ways, telling them the truth - when we were speaking on the phone or going out alone, no more lying. We also brought each other along if we were invited to a braai or evening out. This helped us feel more prepared and I think also helped prepare our friends that we were more than what they thought.

The hardest confession would be our parents. This one I knew was going to be difficult. Even though me and my mom had, had our problems in the past and still have others, I was just not ready to disappoint her again, and especially not my dad. But the time had come to tell them,

Leigh:

My parents have gotten to know Allison quite well over the past two years, as she accompanied me home almost every weekend. They had always been very warm and open towards Allison and treated her as part of the family. I decided to go home alone one weekend and talk to my parents, telling them about me and Allison. I acted on my decision as soon as possible after making it, because I know from experience that waiting for the right moment is tricky - there is never truly a *right moment*. Something always messes it up, someone's not there or someone else is in a bad mood. I was aware that my family must already suspect that I might be gay and that Allison and I were involved in a relationship. The weekend at home, my parents and I were watching television together in their room, however I had decided to wait until my brother was also present. He joined us and I said "I am gay and Allison and I are in a relationship" to which my Dad just replied by saying that they were not stupid and have known for a while. This response disappointed me, although I had my suspicions that they knew I was gay I expected more, a simple "It's okay, we still love you" would have been nice. Before coming out to anyone, you always run through the scenarios in your mind, but it never happens exactly like that. You can have a perfectly planned speech, but in the end, you just blurt it out - not at all in the way you intended it too, but at least then it is out there.

There was never any additional discussion or big fight regarding my coming out to my parents or questions that they wanted answers for from me. I am happy for this as they didn't place additional pressure on me for answers that I didn't have answers for. I didn't blame my parents and I didn't think that they in any way caused me to be gay, this is just who I am. We never talked about the issues surrounding my coming out or the fact that I was gay, but I also never experience them as having a problem with this fact. To be honest I don't feel the need or a wish to discuss anything like that with my parent, if they were ever to ask me questions, I would probably refer them to Allison.

Allison: *My mom is a difficult person and can sometimes make such a big thing from nothing. I was not always ready for a big unnecessary fight. My mom and I had always had a rocky relationship, ever since I can remember; this might be due to the fact that we are so alike. She always favoured my sister and of course she denied it, but I knew. Little things, gestures and even the superficial things like gifts and occasions were obvious give-aways. I've had issues with it my whole life, always trying to compete for attention, but it was difficult as my sister was an over achiever, the perfect daughter a mother could wish for. So I just gave up. She already had the perfect daughter, so why bother trying. I wasn't a wash out, I excelled in what I was good at, but I was not competing for my mother's love anymore. I know it may sound like my mother was a*

witch and me an unappreciative spoilt brat, but no. My mother was a great mother in her own way, and I was ultimately my father's little girl. So lying to my mom was just easier, not making a fuss of just another thing she would hate me for. But the time for lying had come to an end...I had decided to come clean and come out to my parents. This is a decision that I had turned around in my head, talked about with Leigh and played out over and over in my imagination. There was never any right moment - my mom had even once, while we were driving in the car, asked me if I was gay - I had just said no.

The time had come. I scraped together my courage and resolve, every last bit I could find, and decided that tonight was the night. I had spoken to Leigh about it and she would be waiting, phone in hand for me to call. I was waiting for my dad to come home, such a normal act, but it caused a great deal of stress. He was working late. When he came home I was standing in the kitchen and looked at him. He looked back and asked "What do you want? Do you want money?" in a joking tone of voice. I just looked back at him and said "I have to tell you something" and the it just slipped out, I told my mom and dad: "Leigh and I are together". My mother just started saying "no, no, no, what do you mean" and my dad explained that Leigh and I were a couple. Then my mom freaked out a little bit, but by then all my courage and resolve had been used up. I could talk to them at that moment and told them as much before I ran to my car and drove away.

I never imagined that it would be that bad, well for me it had been terribly difficult. I phoned Leigh in tears and told her that if ever anyone asked me if they should come out to their parents, my answer would be "No, no, no, never!" and my advice "Lie, lie, lie keep it a secret as long as you can". However, my secret was out, it was a long night, with lots of crying. I went home late that night, when I knew my mom and dad would be sleeping. That night I sat down and wrote my mom a long letter, because she wouldn't speak to me after I had run out of the house having said so little. I tried to explain in the letter, I included the fact that we had been together for a while, that this was not just a fling and also how her family accepted me. The letter was my way of trying to explain and communicate with my mother, and also a way that I knew she would take in all the information before responding. After reading the letter, my mom came to talk to me. She woke me up the following morning and told me that it was okay, that she accepted Leigh and that she accepted me.

My mom struggled with the acceptance and is still growing towards it I think. I know she loves me and would never reject me, but my coming out is something that she couldn't quite grasp. She is someone who needs to talk things through, to understand why and to ask a lot of questions. I can see that she feels blame for my being gay and that she is looking for answers, but these are not answers that I have. I don't blame her and I don't think that she should blame herself. I fell in love

with a person, and that person happens to be a woman. Later I realised, it came down to a choice, they can accept you or reject you, but somehow you need to be okay with that. It's your life and you can't live it for them.

Leigh:

My parents accepted Allison as part of the family. I observed changes in my parent's behaviour towards me and Allison, after I had told them of our relationship. When we went to visit them, they made up a double bed for us and in the mornings they bring us tea and sit on the bed to chat. This felt weird to me in the beginning, having a girl in bed with me and chatting to my mom, sitting on the edge of that same bed with a cup of tea. My dad is very relaxed and accepting and the rest of the extended family has also accepted Allison. Telling my grandmother was something that I had to do as well. My grandmother had grown to love Allison as well and when I told her that we were getting married she just said "don't mess it up". I had chosen to not tell her that I was gay and dating Allison, but decided on rather telling her once Allison and I were getting married.

Allison's parents were another matter. Her dad was accepting and relaxed, but her mother at times tactlessly shows her opinion about our relationship. She talks to Allison about meeting a friend's son for coffee of going out to dinner with single men that she has recently met. It often feels like a competition as she does this while I sit next to Allison, across the table from her at Sunday lunch. I mostly keep quiet, but it does hurt me and it most definitely pisses me off.

Allison: *I knew that this would be difficult for my mother to accept the fact that I was in a relationship with a woman, but I also knew that she would try to understand. I had, however, never imagined how much effort, explanation and defence it would take. After coming out, there were some changes; Leigh was no longer allowed to sleep in my room. This had been acceptable in the past, although my parents knew that Leigh was a lesbian, but now it was no longer allowed. It also seemed that my mom was accepting, and everything was fine, but she just didn't want us to go public. My mom is very aware of social image and how society perceives you and she did not want to be judge or me to be judged by society. To her it was also a big issue that I did not look gay. In her mind I did not fit the social image of what a lesbian looks like, not dressing in baggy or boyish clothing. This is still something that she focuses on, if I wear a pair of jeans she doesn't like, she asks if I'm now going to start dressing all butch.*

My parents have an almost "in your face" interaction with society and I think it was therefore more difficult for my mom to just accept and move on. In the beginning she didn't tell anyone and didn't want anyone to know. I had a friend from high school with whom I was very close, and her mother loved me, like a second daughter. When she found out I was gay, she phoned my mother and chastised her about how what I was doing was wrong. Encounters like these made it more

difficult for my mom to accept things. In her search for answers however she has slowly become more open with different people, meeting a friend whose son is also gay and talking about it together or talking to friends about it, showing Leigh and I off to a group of friends before our wedding.

At first I suspect that my mother thought this was all just a fling, some phase that I would out grow, but as time went on and she saw that this was something permanent, especially when Leigh and I got engaged. She made a point of explaining and showing her feelings about our relationship, but in a way that only my mother would do. She perfected the art of tactlessness, the art of subtle comments and gestures. She always told me about a new guy she met that I would love, or the new single neighbour that moved in. She always made remarks about how we should not flaunt our relationship in public, but I think the worst of it all, something she always did that crept under my skin was when she brings up an old fling in conversation or when she points out a hot guy in a restaurant when she and I are alone. She makes these remarks, seeming not to care that Leigh is sitting at the same table, right across from her. Doing it in such a way, as if to try and coax a reaction from Leigh. A long time after coming out to my parents, after moving in with Leigh and building a stable home with her, my mom still has her doubts, problems and confusion about us.

I know it is not easy for parents, even though I am not a parent myself, in a way I can imagine what she is going through, but at some stage I just want to shout "get over it!". When will my heart be taken into consideration? This is not a path that I would wish upon anyone, but if this is the path that you have to take to reach love, to meet your soul-mate and discover yourself, then it is the best path you can take. All around us are people from broken marriages, people living a lie and people living without love and I pity these people that have not found the perfect love, as I have. I never imagined loving someone the way I love Leigh, it caught me by surprise too. Even 7 years later I still feel the same way and I will feel this way about her for the rest of my life. Who can come between that? Who in their right mind can say that it is wrong?

Leigh:

There are also other areas in life where coming out is something that I need to do again and again. Work is an area where I need to come out each time I change jobs or offices. And I know because I *look gay* many people in the office speculate. When I have disclosed to one individual I usually think that the news will spread, but somehow there are always individuals who pretend that they don't know or who apologise profusely for their *error* in judgement. Coming out is always something stressful and is never completely done. I have to come out even at the doctor, dentist and optometrist. Allison is my dependent on my medical aid and each time I need to explain that the Leigh on the card is not her sister or mother, but me - her wife.

There are areas in life where coming out is easier than others. When we meet new people it is always somewhat difficult and you can see the shock in their faces and sense the uncomfortable atmosphere that follows. Friends sometimes come out for you, as we have many straight friends, when they invite us to a braai they usually disclose to the individuals they invite beforehand that Allison and I are a couple. This makes it much easier. Inviting individuals over to our house also eases the process as they can see the photos on the wall, see the double bed and draw their own conclusions from there. There is however one thing I can say - The more times you come out, the easier it gets! And although it might sound like it is a struggle, we are a normal couple, leading a normal life together. Our friends admire our relationship and we are happy together, planning our future.

Allison: *It is always difficult to tell new people, somehow people never expect it. There are always new people and areas of life where I need to come out, and I don't know why, but for some reason coming out is always stressful. When people hear that you are a lesbian they always judge you in some way, and are almost fearful of you. Almost like they don't want to catch what you have, and because of this it feels like society has a place just for people who don't belong, the different, the outsiders. They place you on the fringe of society and you fit in with the other people who don't fit exactly fit in with society's expectations.*

I am just very thankful for our group of friends. They are truly like our family, our support system. With them I feel accepted, understood and even admired at times. They look up to us, relationship wise and always say that they want what we have. If only everyone could see past their pre-judgements and their perceptions and fears, but because they can't we always need to defend and explain and justify our love. It sounds like a struggle, but it isn't that bad, we love our life, but we always need to do just a little bit extra to be seen as Allison and Leigh instead of "those two lesbians". I am not a murderer, I am not a druggie, I am not a freak, I am kind to animals. I don't hate anyone, I'm not mean, I am just a normal human being - I am just me! I am a woman in love. Yes, I am in love with a woman. You can call me a dyke! You can call me a lesbian. You can call me bisexual. Or you can just call me Allison! Either way, I am who I am and no society, religion, mother, government or label will tell me otherwise.

Story number 2

(Bronwyn) Mom's story:

I don't particularly like the word lesbian, to me it feels somehow wrong, not a very nice word, I think it has to do with how and when I was raised. Strange, gruff individuals on the outside society fit with this word in my mind, because that is what I saw. I might not like the word lesbian, but my daughter is gay and I love her.

If I look back over the years I think, there were times I deluded myself and didn't want to admit what I knew. Leigh has always been somewhat boyish, drawn to different activities than the other little girls. She seemed more at ease with her best friends, usually boys, games and interests than she did with frilly dresses or dolls. In fact we had a few fights over dresses, and she definitely preferred marbles over dolls. Marbles was an activity that she and her grandmother would do together each weekend and an activity that fostered a bond between her and Gran. At first I wasn't worried, I mean, I never suspected that she was gay - just not like other little girls.

Leigh has always had a strong bond with her father, wanting to be like him and enjoying learning from him. They spent a lot of time together when she was young, fixing bicycle tyres and laughing together. Chris spent a lot of time teaching her things and enjoying their shared interests. I love Leigh, she is my daughter, but as she grew up we were never really very close and we didn't have a good relationship. I suspect that one of the reasons for this is that, part of me attempted to push her in the specific direction that I envisioned for her. However this is not what Leigh wanted, it was not how Leigh saw herself and it is not how things turned out. I had a dream for Leigh, well for all my children, a dream where life would not be hard on them and they would be happy. My wish for Leigh had been: meeting a good man, having children and living happily with her family - this had made me happy and I envisioned the same happiness for her.

Over the years there were many times when I think I just didn't want to admit to myself what I saw and what I think I always knew. However there comes a point where you realise that you need to make a decision about: What is more important - your daughter or social perception, for me it came down to - Accept Leigh or lose Leigh. I never want to lose Leigh, she is my daughter and always will be and so the choice was easy, but acknowledgement and acceptance did not happen overnight.

When I look back at Leigh's high school and early university years, I don't think I realised at the time what a struggle it was for her. At some point it seemed that she had a big challenge with understanding why God made her this way. We have always been a very religious family, going to church/Sunday school come rain or shine, but I felt let down by the church. We tried to talk to our pastor about the situation and instead of talking with us he just referred us to a psychologist. I was looking for support, not an intervention and to me it felt like he let us down. Leigh was struggling with her own questions and challenges. We did not have the type of open relationship where we could talk easily about issues like this, and I must add that family obligations, raising three children and managing life in general meant that my attention was mostly divided. Therefore I didn't realise that anything was truly wrong until her confirmation year, Grade 11.

We realised that Leigh was depressed and turning to self harming behaviour. This shocked me, I just wanted to help her, but lack of information about situations like these, uncertainty, fear and feeling helpless and guilty meant that I didn't know how or where to begin. It felt to me as though she had a lot of anger and hateful feelings towards me and her sister and I didn't know why. We went to see a psychologist and that road led to medication and clinics;

here I think we made our biggest mistakes... We went to visit her at the clinic the final time she was there and Chris and I could see her struggling with these issues, struggling to accept herself and struggling to acknowledge to herself. This was the last straw, without having discussed it beforehand Chris and I just looked at her and said that we knew she was gay and it doesn't matter. It was as if we then realised what it was all about, and it didn't matter. She asked if someone had told us and we just replied that no one told us, we could see it, we had been walking the road with her for a long time and it didn't matter, we still loved her. There at the clinic that day I think I made peace with it, I accepted her the way that she is and I didn't want to lose her. She came home and decided to stop taking the medication. She came home and cried for about a week, and Leigh isn't someone who cries. I remember sitting on the couch with her lying on my lap crying. She didn't know why, but I don't think it mattered that she didn't know why...

She went to visit my mother after this and stayed there for about three months, when she returned she had a new direction that her life was taking and moved to the Technicon. There she met Allison and Allison started to come home for visits with Leigh; however I never suspected that Allison was gay. Somehow there is an image that forms from being raised on "black or white" or "right or wrong" terms. An image of what a gay individual looks like, you know, butch or with strange clothes or rings or well...I don't exactly know. However I didn't think Allison was gay, but in the end I was not surprised when we found out. I knew they were very close and we had known Allison for a long time by then. The way she told us about her and Allison was actually more shocking than it was finding out about her and Allison. Chris, my son and I were sitting in our room, I think Chris might have been in bed already, when she came in and said: You know I'm gay, Allison and I are together. That's more or less how I remember it, and it seems as if she just blurted it out, already defensive. When I think about it, she probably needs to be very defensive; they don't always have an easy life. I think that she and Allison have to defend a lot of what they do or who they are to society and that's where the defensiveness comes from, but still the way she told us about their involvement felt very blunt and tactless.

As a family we love Allison and I am very grateful and thankful for her in Leigh and our lives. She is someone whom you never need to be ashamed of and who is always presentable, friendly and open. I must admit that, in the beginning, it felt strange to see Leigh that close and physically comfortable with Allison, as she had never been a touchy person or liked kissing extended family members and even I could never sit snugly next to her on a couch. Although Leigh and Allison are very comfortable with each other, they always behave very respectfully in front of us and I appreciate the gesture.

Acceptance is not an easy thing, when you have been raised to think a certain way. Somehow finding out is a very lonely process. Not having someone to talk to about it, someone who understands what you're going through or the questions and thoughts you have. As a family we never openly discussed Leigh being gay or what we thought about it. There were never issues, but it was a private matter, even Chris and I have not talked about it to this day. It's not an elephant in the room, but also hasn't been a topic of discussion. I found relief when I told a friend at work

about Leigh. Her daughter had also come out, although she later married a man, this friend of mine is someone who has been where I am and can understand without judgement or expecting answers. It was good to have someone to talk to, someone who knows.

One of my first reactions to Leigh coming out, and my friend disclosed the same, was blaming myself, wondering what I did wrong and considering where I failed as a parent. That is how it felt at first, as though I had failed somehow. In a way it is a search for answers, and I don't know if there are even answers, the more I read and the more I realise that there are many individuals out there who are gay the less lonely I feel and the more I feel that perhaps if celebrities are accepted, life will not be so hard for Leigh. If I could make life easier for any of my children, in any way, I would I just want them to be happy... I know that life is not always easy for individuals like Leigh and Allison. Society judges them and people don't realise that they are just normal individuals like you or I. They need to defend themselves and battle challenges that otherwise would not have been there, it is a hard life at times.

When I had just found out about Leigh and Allison I did not want to tell anyone, for fear of what they would say or think. Society is a harsh judge and people have very specific perceptions and ideas about what it means to be gay. Even when sitting with people I know, they sometimes make comments about gay people, and I think to myself: "you have no idea what you're talking about". They didn't know about Leigh when making these comments, but still they were hurtful comments, and I just left without saying a word. This made me feel so guilty, I should have said something, I should have stood up for my daughter, but I didn't know what to say and I was so overwhelmed by their comments that I just left. It is as if some people just can't see them as normal people. However, the more information I read and the more I watch television I gain awareness of individuals leading a gay and normal lifestyle. The fact that Leigh's brother and sister also accept her and Allison without qualms makes it easier as well, seeing their acceptance and knowing that they grew up in a world with more tolerance than I did.

I had just gotten used to the idea of Leigh and Allison together when the next shock took place; Leigh phoned me one day and asked if her father had told me she was planning on asking Allison to marry her. I didn't know and at first I just ignored it. Then they got engaged and we decided, we wanted to be at the wedding and be supportive. We had been to a wedding where the mother of the bride was unsupportive and didn't even want to be on the wedding photos - I didn't want to hurt my daughter like that. So we were there and it was a lovely day. The wedding however raised a new challenge, something new to face - the rest of the family becoming aware that Leigh was gay. It would force the family to deal with the issue and react, either positively or negatively. This was a concern to me, I am close with my family, but in the past few years had drifted apart and how would they react to the news? I was especially concerned about Leigh's grandmother, she grew up in different times and old people are conservative, I didn't know how she would take it and told Leigh that she would have to tell Gran herself.

Leigh did tell Gran and after all the worry, all the build up and stress Gran's reaction was an anti-climax, she told Leigh that if it made her happy, it was fine. Leigh gave Gran a wedding card and she spoke to me later saying that Leigh was her favourite grandchild, and that to her it did not matter, she still loved Leigh just as much. There was definitely a feeling of relief for me when I heard this response. There had been doubt and fear about how the extended family would react to the news of the wedding. Although I'm sure some of them suspected that Leigh was gay - there is a difference between suspecting and knowing.

I was somewhat concerned, because in the past when Leigh had struggled with her own acceptance the rest of the family seemed to keep their distance, not wanting to get too involved. I was afraid that this could be a repeat of that experience. It wasn't - everyone in the family was supportive. My brother even told me that he felt Leigh might have wanted to talk to him when she was visiting them, but that he felt bad because he did not know how to deal with the situation. My sister phoned me as well and I didn't know quite what to say, she just said that this was how it was, she told me to look at how happy Leigh was now compared to ten years ago, and that there were no issues about this in their family, they were happy for her and Allison. The experience reconnected some bonds and communications that had faded over the years and reinforced the support system that I have in my own siblings and family.

We have always been a happy family who laugh together and enjoy life. I am not sure why we never talked about it or felt the need to conceal it until confronted by issues or a wedding, but I know that I love my daughter and am very happy that she has found a partner like Allison. Although I am not sure what the future holds and whether there will be any more shocks and surprises. I truly want them to be happy and make it work.

Story number 3

(Chris) Dad's story:

When I think about my daughter, Leigh, I can remember that from a young age, she asserted herself as an individual. She wasn't like the other girls. I can remember one specific time, when she was in Grade 1, I bought her a beautiful pink bicycle, with ribbons on the handle bars and a basket in the front, but I had to go and exchange it for a BMX. That was the bicycle she wanted. Leigh was her own person, she wasn't a girly girl, but enjoyed playing marbles and other activities that society usually associates with, well not girly girls.

I was not surprised when Leigh told us that she was gay and currently dating Allison, how could I be? We had been suspecting that she and Allison were in a relationship for quite some time and so my reply was, basically, yes we know. I remember her telling us this information while we were sitting together watching television and I must say she was very blunt about it. She just sort of said it, almost in a rude way, well not rude, rather more defensive. I don't think that the way that she told us was meant to be rude or defensive, but I do think that she didn't know

exactly how to address the situation and so just blurted it out. There wasn't much time or space to respond with more than "Yes we know".

When I look back over the years I know that Leigh didn't have it easy. She struggled with some issues in high school, showing typical signs of depression, withdrawing into herself, becoming isolated and sleeping most of the time. We called in the help of psychologists and medication, which I felt was a mistake and to me it felt like it just exacerbated the situation. For a while it felt like we were all walking on eggshells, not wanting to make anything worse or cause any harm. It was not an easy time for us as a family and it affected everyone in its own way.

Leigh then left for her first year at university, where it seemed that things got worse, her issues and depression seemed to be getting the better of her. She then came home, and was at a clinic for a short period. While she was at the clinic, Bronwyn and I went to see her. As she was sitting on the bed, without discussing it beforehand we knew it was time to talk to her. I looked at her and just said, Leigh, if you have issues, if you're gay, it's okay. We still love you, there's no problem with that, we just want you to get better. I knew at that stage it was accept her or lose her, and I will never reject my daughter.

She took some time off to visit family by the sea and then came back, a new lease on life and she headed off to her new university. As I say I was not surprised that Leigh is gay. Some individuals are born gay, I am sure that some choose this lifestyle as well, but there are others for whom this is no choice. For us it had been a general and systematic awareness and growth towards acceptance over time. She will never be a son to me; she is my daughter whom I accept for who she is.

Although the path to acceptance is not an easy one, I am sure it is not easy for any parent; there was never any confrontation or situation where we chased her out of our house or anything to that effect. She will always be our daughter, and the fact that we accept it and I can see her accepting herself has had a big effect on her relationship with us. It is a much calmer and much closer relationship than in the past, especially with her mother. I can see that now, when comparing her with her high school years, she is much more comfortable, accepting herself, not just struggling with issues, but a whole person.

The next big event was their engagement and wedding. This was unusual, but we showed our support and wanted to be there. The wedding also made it more visible and real to the rest of the family. Bronwyn was more concerned about this fact I think, because she is closer to her family than I am with mine. However there was no nastiness of fighting. The wedding just forced the family to look at what was happening and acknowledge the event. The rest of the family showed their support and in a way brought the extended family together.

As hindsight is 20/20 as I look back I wish we communicated had more. Talked as parents and as a family about what we saw and experienced. We avoided issues and didn't talk about being gay or feeling different, if we had

done this at an earlier stage, when she was in Grade 9 or 10, we might have avoided some other challenges or issues. So my advice to other parents would be to talk, to each other and their kids, to be a source of guidance to them and help them understand what is going on.

Story number 4

(Debra) Mom's story:

My daughter telling me that she was in a lesbian relationship is not something that I ever even suspected, never, never, never did I think to expect that from Allison... She was a nymph, she loved clothes, she's beautiful and there are lots of men who are attracted to her - I know, because I have seen them look at her when we have company and I always thought I saw her looking back, now this...The road and partner she has chosen for her life, is not what I would have chosen, but it is her choice. I know that the choice she has made took courage and strong conviction, but it is something that my heart and head still struggle with at times.

As a nursery school teacher I have always been supportive of girls doing activities that are not necessarily considered *girly*. In our society of today there are not many restrictions placed on them and I believe that this gives them balance. Girls are after all, the engineers of the future. Allison always liked wires and pliers and had a good deal of these in her room from a young age. I have always supported her hobby and interest. Now at times I wonder...should I have encouraged more feminine behaviour? I don't know. I have always seen myself as an ally to the gay/lesbian cause. I am a feminist at heart and believe that society is beginning to move towards female empowerment, embracing a matriarchal order instead of the traditionally patriarchal society of the past. In the not so distant future I believe, women will be in control, so perhaps Allison is just a product of her time. Men are just not a necessity anymore; we can even have children without them... so we are without restrictions, independent from males. However I also believe in balancing energies, such as Yin and Yang being necessary to create harmony in the world. Male and female energies bringing balance to relationships and to individuals. I have seen this in my own life and have found comfort in the harmony of this balance.

When I look back and think of Allison, she always appeared to be independent and self-confident. I encouraged independence in my children from a young age...I even remember telling them that they needed to make their own dentist and doctor's appointments. I do however remember that whenever there was a group of children or a queue, Allison would place herself in the back of the queue, remaining humble and somewhat unassertive. She excelled at what she was good at, but she was never an overachiever. That was more her sister's territory. The two of them were complete opposites, one born on the 6th and the other on the 9th. A different personality, each in their own right and as a mother it is sometimes difficult to ensure that each of them gets their own place and time in the sun. Allison and I have always had a good relationship, but she is a critical person, well I suppose that we are both critical people and that makes it challenging to always just say what we want to.

Allison has a large group of friends that have been together since high school, although she never brought home a lot of boyfriends or love interests she had a lot of social connections. I have only recently heard that she also has a lot of friends who are gay/lesbian. I never knew that there were that many people she knew that were gay/lesbian. I was completely unaware of this subculture, this lesbian and gay world that she had access to. I could never truly see Allison falling head over heels and marrying a man, but I never imagined that she would marry a woman. I imagined her living an independent life, doing what she loved and yes - being happy. Until Leigh became a part of the picture, I had no suspicions at all. After some time I began suspecting that something was going on. I even watched a program called "the L-word" and talked to Allison about it. I wanted to discourage her, and show her that - she could be missing out on an experience with a man. That there were other parts of life and physical being that could also be explored. I hoped that the *lesbian experience* was just a phase, an experiment that her feelings for Leigh were just those of friendship and that Allison would realise it and it would blow over. This was probably my hope as a mother, that my own dreams would not be lost, that what I feared was not *as bad*, if it was a phase then everything would return to normal and we could carry on living as we had done in the past.

In the past I myself had, had a similar experience, I had also at a time felt attracted to a woman. Women have always been beautiful to me, but for me it became clear at that time, that my attraction to this woman stemmed from the disruption of the other relationships in my life. You know? - When your relationships with the important people in your life are not what they should be... When there are challenges in your relationships, it can be easier to find solace in the nurturing and caring arms of a woman. I understand the appeal, women know how to nurture, and when you feel fragile the comforting and understanding arms of a woman can feel good. A woman knows how to comfort and to sooth you when you are feeling fragile and hurt and those feelings can turn to more. However I came to my senses and made the decision not to travel further down that avenue of my life. I made this decision and know that it was the right one for me, even now, I know that for me the infatuation was just friendship and enjoying that nurturing side of womanhood.

In my life I need that manly energy, the influence of the Yin to my Yang to balance my life. I mean, even if you look at my house you can see the influence of my husband and I feel this has brought a balance to our relationship and our life together. Even when we are not close, we are in balance. I think that it is important to make that decision, before the passionate feelings of friendship change to feelings of love. I think if you let it go that far, it would be impossible to return. It would be too comforting and safe. The relationship would become too nurturing and you wouldn't be able to leave. I sometimes wonder if that isn't what happened between Allison and Leigh, if it was not just intense feelings of friendship, which were then accepted as love. People have told me that it must take a lot of courage for Allison to choose this life. I agree with them, it is not an easy life. I would never be able to be that courageous; I wouldn't be able to do that to my mother. I know that Allison must be sure of herself; she has always been street wise and wouldn't have made this decision lightly. She has always listened to the advice and counsel of her friends. She has chosen to live her life in this way, with this person. Sometimes I think that I should just hush and accept it now...

Allison didn't *tell* us that she was a lesbian. She came out to us in a letter. I didn't appreciate being told in a letter, when looking back now I actually wish we had, had a big confrontation, a big fight with a lot of things being said. Then we would have said everything that we wanted to, aired out all the emotions and opinions. I think that then at least I would have felt that I got to say everything I wanted to say to her. After her coming out to us, I remember thinking, "okay, then do it, just don't tell everyone". I have lived in this community my whole life. Everyone here knows me and my daughters, and I didn't know how to deal with them knowing that Allison has chosen this life. However, by then I expect that everyone already knew, Allison has, as I mentioned before, a large group of friends, including some gay/lesbian friends, so I am sure that people knew already. This also irked me somewhat, when I would speak to someone - I could tell that they knew, they would ask about Tracy, Allison's sister, and then only after a while they would ask: "and Allison..." so I could tell that they were aware. I must admit that I didn't, and still don't, know how to handle moments like that. I usually just give a general answer about work et cetera, but it's difficult for me...I know that they know and I feel judged in some way by them.

After Allison told me, things went on as normal for a while. Well, normal...what is normal? I'm not sure that there truly is such a thing as normal. I hoped that this phase would pass and that Allison would return to her old life. Each time there was a change, for example when she moved or started a new job or met new friends I hoped that being exposed to other individuals would convince her and she would change back. I hoped that being exposed to new people and new experiences would make her aware of other options of other possibilities that she might not have yet considered or explored. That the feelings she felt for Leigh would be recognised as strong feelings of friendship. I never imagined that it would be permanent and lasting. I thought that she would experiment, but then it would blow over.

There was even a time during this process where, and this is actually very embarrassing for me, but I wanted Allison to live a pretence of normal life, she could cheat with women later if she wanted to. I suppose that was just my way of keeping my own dreams alive. A way to see if she couldn't be shown that that life could also be good for her. Allison told me that she could never live a lie like that. I admire her courage and honesty; her fierce independence. Yet the loss of the dreams I had for my daughter is a big disappointment. The life I pictured for her and the dreams I had of grandchildren, a son-in-law - you know that perfect picture that society paints of the beautiful man and woman with their children...it just feels like such a shock and a disappointment, almost like a grieving process.

I have read quite a lot of books and recent literature on the topic... Not out of a desire for research, but I felt drawn to these books, almost like they were placed on my life path. Many of these books discuss strong women and how they stand together, support each other and live their lives without the influence of men. Some books discuss the appropriateness of having a *sister* or a close female *friend* to practice with before marriage. Describing close relationships of women, whereafter they marry and live happy lives with their husbands and I wonder - Why do they make that choice? What is the difference there? I have also read that when normal experimentation or sexual

development in children is taken up the wrong way and children are made to feel shameful for their actions, they may also feel that this event has created a specific path for them. Should I have done something different? Yet I know that I cannot change things and at times I feel powerless. The worst thing is that it is beautiful to me when two people find each other - like in a movie by Kingsley that I saw, two women finding each other and loving each other... I can understand it when two older women find each other, they are lonely and they find comfort and solace in each other, but Allison is young and vibrant... Perhaps the subculture or world of the gay/lesbian population also seems somewhat forbidden or taboo and this could be alluring and inviting to some. Making the life seem more attractive, because of the forbidden nature and drawing in individuals. I can understand all these things and yet, when I think about my own daughter it is not my head that does not understand, but my heart that searches for answers.

I can see that Leigh is a lesbian, through and through. She fits the lesbian image; the way she looks, the way she talks, everything about her makes it easy to see that she truly is a lesbian and I have no problems with this fact. However Allison is feminine and beautiful and not at all boyish or manly. She doesn't fit that image in my opinion. She has always been the *fashionista*, the girly-girl, titivating when men are around, laughing and enjoying the company of men. I just cannot see her as a lesbian. I know that men are attracted to her, I can see it when they are in her company. I can also see her responding to the attention at times, twirling her hair, giggling and titivating. What makes it worse, in a way, is that I don't feel a connection with Leigh. I don't think we've ever spoken more than 10 words to each other. I try, but to me it doesn't feel like she fits in with how we as a family do things. It feels like she is too different from us and I cannot voice my opinions about this because I know that Allison would fight with me immediately and I don't want to be the mom who always fights with her daughter. I know that Allison has chosen this life, I say chosen, because I don't believe that she is a lesbian, maybe she is more bisexual, however, she has chosen to spend her life with Leigh. I can see why. When I look at Leigh I see her attractive face and fine features, but I just don't know. Like I said this was never what I expected.

Allison coming out also reaches much further than just our immediate family. My own mother for example doesn't know what to make of this... she doesn't understand this at all. To my mother this is all very strange and unnatural. This is something that also makes this process challenging for me, I mean she is my mother. I never cry in front of or with my mom, there I have to be strong. With my mother I am a different person all together. There I am Allison and Leigh's advocate. I try to show my mother the beautiful side - I always call Allison and Leigh our two lovely birds, always twittering and chatting tweet, tweet, tweet. This is also true, they are always talking and sharing together like two little birds in our house.

The sad part is that we are all dependent on the acceptance of others outside ourselves. This is the tough part of life that we all need to be accepted by society and be seen as part of the whole. This is sad, because the individual should actually be celebrated in the society of today and not the larger norm group. Society holds certain expectations. You see the beautiful pictures of men and women and families together, but you never see a lesbian

or gay relationship being promoted. When we go out and Allison and Leigh accompany us, I can see the way other people look at them. When they hold hands, or walk together. Any public display of affection is perceived with judgement and significant looks from the bystanders. This in turn makes me feel uncomfortable, having people look and judge. I am sure that it is not easy for them either, having to hide or feel uncomfortable with public displays of affection. For me the physical aspect of Allison and Leigh's relationship is also still an uncomfortable and somewhat touchy subject. I am aware that they do have their own social circle and ties with the gay/lesbian subculture, but I feel sorry for my daughter. She has not chosen an easy path to follow..

It was a shock when I heard that they wanted to get married. I still expected the relationship to pass, to blow over and then they were talking about marriage and permanence... Leigh came to talk to my husband and I one evening and told us that they wanted to get married. We were very negative about it and I remember saying that I felt that they didn't really know each other. Leigh replied that they have known each other for seven years, and yes it was just a difficult evening for me. I have always supported unions between individuals who love each other, but when it's your own daughter, then understanding and acceptance do not always go together, it is not as easy. Allison planned the whole wedding, she did everything. She organised the venue and just about everything that was associated with the wedding. I was not very involved in the planning of the day, I think partially because Allison knew I was not very excited about the day. My mother and brother did not attend the wedding, although we could invite our family and friends. However in the end I think the people who needed to be at the wedding, were at the wedding. It was a beautiful and peaceful day. Both Allison and Leigh looked lovely. At the wedding I also felt a moment of serenity and just had a realisation that I need to accept this now. It is permanent and Allison has made her final decision and I can see that Leigh cares for her and takes care of her. I have also seen Allison become a strong and self-confident individual who can stand up for what she believes in.

Throughout my life this theme of "woman loving woman" has cropped up in a number of forms, my own experience, friends telling me of their experiences, books that have called out to me and now in my own daughter's life choice and relationship. I believe in messages from the universe and this is something that has happened and been sent to my life, a recurring theme. At the beginning it made me question everything, looking back on situations and interactions wondering – "what else did I miss?". I looked at life through *lesbian-tinted* glasses and saw only what could be interpreted as being a lesbian pass or small acts that may declare behaviour as being *lesbian*. Recently however I have been on a trip with my friend and I have clarified my own experience. I can hug or kiss a friend hello without fearing that they will think I am a lesbian. And this trip has also helped me to realise that I made the right choice for me. I miss my husband and my life when away with a friend, even if she and I could shop and talk and do what we wanted, I am glad to be home. Although I might struggle with my understanding vs. my emotional response to the situation, I know that I made the right choice for me.

Throughout my life there have been unexpected events and moments as well as experiences I have been drawn to, that have prepared me and helped me gain understanding of the recurrent theme in my life. I have always believed

that things will work out positively in the way they were meant to. Now I still believe this, I hope, no I know that my daughter is happy and will be happy. Our relationship is adjusting to our new lives. We communicate less than we used to, and I believe that it is a time where we afford each other the opportunity to live our own lives. We gain distance from each other to ensure that we can live our lives as we want to. I am rediscovering myself and Allison is being the person that she wants to be.

My own life is in transition, a time of hibernation and introspection. I know that it is a time where I need to rediscover myself and work on my relationship with my husband. Looking back over the years, seeing what has been and re-evaluating who I am. Even in menopause, I think about the image of the phoenix, they say that, that is why you have such heat waves, to burn away the impurities, so that you can rise from the ashes, your true self. Perhaps this is God's way of telling me, look at Allison's courage, now go out and live your life and show the true you. I will move through the period of hibernation in my life and embrace my own being, also rising up like a phoenix celebrating my own identity - apart from being just mother, wife or daughter, but rather as being Debra.

Story number 5

Rob's story:

I was her second best option, well that's how Allison describes it, in her Memoirs, and I guess it makes sense. I can see her reasoning behind her decision: If I can't talk to my girl friends, then my gay friend would be the next best option and an added bonus could be the advice or experience that he has. I can't argue with her reasoning, it made sense. Allison and I had been close friends since high school. She had had boyfriends, but never anything serious. I never really suspected that Allison was gay and we actually have quite an ironic shared memory. We were at a party together in Matric, it was a friend of mine's birthday. We walked into the party and saw a guy splitting and dancing up and down a pole. I remember turning to Allison and saying, "See, now none of our friends would do something like that" and her replying, "Yes, but none of our friends are gay".

We differ on where she came out to me, I remember it being in a restaurant and she says it was outside my house, it's a point of contention, however I think I'll go with her, she might remember that particular day better than I. It was quite a while ago. I remember her looking very nervous, well of course, who wouldn't be nervous? She told me about kissing Leigh and started talking back and forth about experiences, but then catching herself and saying - but I'm not a lesbian, and then carrying on again. When I think about it, this went on for about four years after our first conversation. How to describe my reaction to her coming out... it is difficult, because to me it feels like we spoke about it for three seconds and then life went on. I was shocked for about one millisecond and then I got over it; I became aware that I couldn't really be shocked by Allison, with her you always had to expect the unexpected. So she came out and then we had a glass of wine, the first of many bottles of wine and sangria that would follow. As I said, I didn't see it coming, but I knew that something was up. Allison was talking and giggling about Leigh, in the

same way someone babbles excitedly when they talk about the person they like, and I could relate very much to her explanation of her first kiss, the feeling of "what am I doing?!".

Over the next few years we had weekly or monthly sessions where we would discuss and philosophise her experiences, the interplay between her and Leigh, but also more general topics; love, the concept of being-gay, society's expectations and things along those lines. It was something that we could talk about, something that cemented our friendship. We would smile when we had inside information on an event or knew that what someone said had relevance to a previous conversation we had had. I think for Allison it was a safe and non-judgemental space where she could talk through things, almost bounce things off me. At the time she was much more emotional when discussing these issues than comes across in her written accounts of the events. I was flattered about her asking my advice or talking to me about these things, but I don't think she ever wanted specific directions or answers from me, rather our relationship facilitated the types of discussions she needed then. A place where she could debate and just talk through what she was thinking, not that her coming out had created this relationship - these had just always been the roles we fulfilled. I was the rational one, the one who would help her weigh her options and think things through. She was impulsive and playful. If there was anything you were wondering about doing, Allison would tell you to "go for it" and I would say "well this is what could happen if you did it this way..."

During our conversations and drinking I could see that Allison battled with what she wanted and the picture that she had always had about what her life should be. I remember her telling me that if Leigh were a man she would marry her the following day. She wanted to make Leigh happy or at the very least ensure her happiness. She would say - we should find Leigh another girlfriend, but this of course never happened.

Allison at some point also went through a phase where she thought that if she could kiss another girl, perhaps this would help her to be certain, she came with me when I went out to gay clubs, but never picked up a girl. After a few times she also said that her friends were looking suspicious and didn't believe that she was only coming along to keep me company. I could also see in some of her actions and obviously hear through our conversations that she was battling the expected norm and what she was feeling and thought she wanted.

In beginning, I must be honest, I didn't like Leigh much, but the feeling was most definitely mutual. I had a very different image of her in my mind, from talking to Allison and what she had told me about her. She was not a peoples, person and came across as rude. I was also somewhat concerned with Leigh's issues I knew she had struggled with in the past. I myself had gone through a depressive stage when I was younger and could relate. Leigh and I were civil towards each other, for Allison's sake, because we were both close to her, and slowly over the years the animosity lessened and we realised one day, when laughing together at something Allison had done, that we had become friends. I now count both of them as close friends.

Then of course there was the incident where Jessica had walked in on them on holiday. Allison phoned me to tell me that Jessica had found out, but that it was okay. I think if it was not for Jessica walking in on them they would not have come out that was the push they needed to disclose. Well they would have had to come out eventually, seeing as they are married now, but still, that was not planned and yet it put the whole process in motion. Most of the friends' reactions I could predict accurately and a lot of the time they were along the lines of "why didn't you tell me?". Our friends reacted much more negatively when they found out that Allison had gotten a tattoo of the first letter in Leigh's name on her forearm. I remember especially what Jessica had said, that Allison could remember things by engraving it on her heart, not her arm. However I think that Allison got the tattoo for all the right reasons, I even lent them the money for the tattoo. I think that after the tattoo Leigh also mellowed out a lot, the tattoo was an image of permanence and commitment.

At times the two of them can have the aura of this *perfect couple*. They are very relaxed and calm with each other and I think that they complement each other well. Allison is much more calm and analytical now, and I can see a greater level of self-confidence. Leigh seems to look after herself better, she's more mellow and seems to enjoy life more now than before. When I heard that they were getting married, it was a surprise, well not really they had talked about it a lot, but it was a happy occasion. The wedding happened fast, but was a very happy event, Allison's mom had a few issues beforehand, but she was very calm and relaxed on the day and Leigh's family was calm and relaxed. To me it was like an affirmation of certainty, you don't go through all of that, and the arrangements and stress if you're not sure. It also brings to mind some advice that my father gave to me, and I then told Allison: it is not about asking if you could spend the rest of your life with this person, but asking yourself if you could spend the rest of your life without them in it.

4.6 Concluding Remarks

Narrative representations can reveal individuals and experiences in all their complexity and uniqueness. Each individual's voice can be heard and their story told appropriately. Through the first person narratives each participant can relay the unique and individually focused experience they had had. In this research study I believed that it was the best way to capture each individual's process and personal journey. The personal nature of each story composed shows a complex and sensitive self (Kramp, 2004). The self and the significant others were represented in the narratives above and I agree with Kramp (2004) that narrative is
 one way to bring order to and showcase individual meanings in experience. In the specific experiences that were identified throughout the data analysis process. In Chapter 5 interpretation of the data is taken a step further and I identify the shared and unique experiences of the significant others involved in the research study.

Chapter 5: Interpretations and discussion: *Making meaning from the narratives*

5.1 Introduction

5.1.1 Who are Significant Others

As discussed in Chapter 2 the two central aspects of the coming out process with which this research study is concerned include: coming out first to the self and then to others. These *others* are the significant others that I included in my study. Significant others play a part in how gay/lesbian individuals regard their own coming out experience and could be regarded in themselves as risk or protective factors. Traditionally friends and family members are accepted as significant others and they were also identified as such by my research participants.

As discussed in Chapter 3 Leigh and Allison identified their family and friends as significant others in their lives and in the coming out process for them. They also went further and indicated which significant others they felt played the *most integral* part in their coming out process and disclosure. These individuals where thereafter contacted. Not all individuals contacted were willing to take part in the research study but the individuals who were included in the study are indicated in the figure below.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, I would not presume to know who the 'significant others' were in the process, but I trusted my participants to identify the relevant individuals. I have interviewed Allison and Leigh and the data generated from this interview was included in Chapter 4. The main focus in this chapter is on the significant others (second group of participants), as identified by Allison and Leigh, I therefore do not discuss the categories identified in the Leigh and Allison interviews as these do not directly address my main research question.

5.1.2 Significant Others seen in Context of the Couple

To understand significant others' experience one has to know and be immersed in the couple's life and experiences. From there the experiences of significant others can be viewed in context and the systemic interactions and experiences can be placed in context. The individuals/couple can be seen as the core narrative or participant group one from where the experiences of others originate and branch off to form individual tangents and their own unique stories. Significant others can, from within this context, relate to the individuals separately or as a couple; interact with systems parallel to their own as well as subsystems within the larger context. One could argue that were it not for the individual or couple coming out or disclosing, there would be no experience to investigate.

Harling (2002) mentions that case study research per se involves the holistic inquiry into a contemporary phenomenon within that natural setting. Thus viewing the case as a whole and including the individuals/couple in this holistic view of the case study is necessary. However, case studies can include various layers of analysis (Yin, 1984 as cited in Eisenhardt, 1989). Therefore it is important to focus on the relevant analysis and interpretation of data to ensure that the focus of the study does not become too broad. Theory plays an important role in case study,

being used to guide the generation and analysis of data produced in the case study (Harling, 2002) In this research study I utilised systems theory as a theoretical framework. This assisted me in viewing the case not merely as a set of participants each on their own but as a system with various interactions. The individuals and subsystems within the case study where interrelated and influenced one another. Even if the individuals/couple were not the main focus, the rest could only be truly understood if viewed within the context of their process and understanding as they form part of the system and are the instrumental case study in the research study.
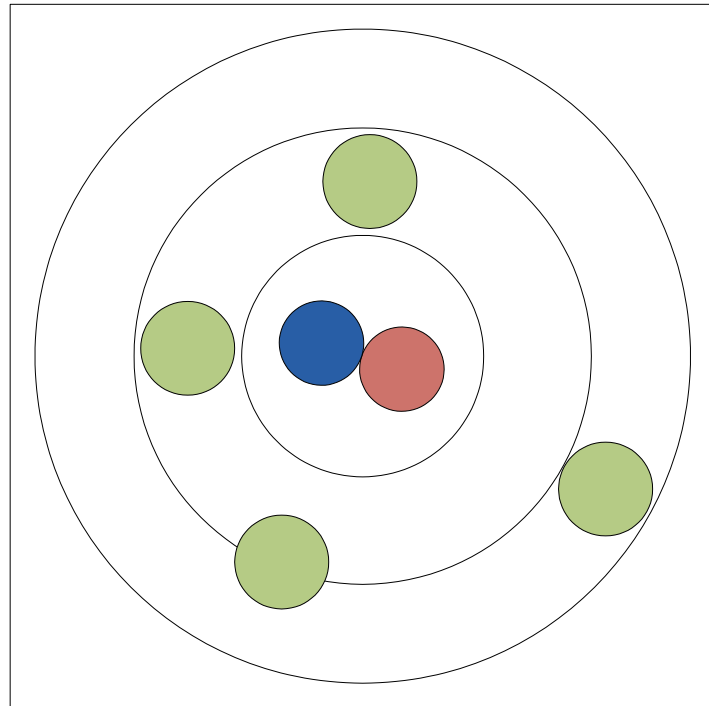

Figure 5: Representation of participants

Harling (2002) mentions that in qualitative research the analysis makes the researcher concentrate on the situation/case, pulling it apart and putting it back together using analysis and synthesis in the method of interpretation until meaning emerges from the data. In looking at cases in this way, knowledge emerges from the data. The situation I explored in this research study included Leigh and Allison as the individuals/couple whose disclosure set the stage as it were for the experiences the research study focuses on. As is shown in Figure 5 above, Leigh and Allison (red and blue) form the central part of the experience, the case study and the system. However, this study is aimed at the experiences of significant others (green circles) and will therefore place the focus of the discussion in this chapter on the relevant participants (significant others) identified earlier.

5.2 Discussion of Research Questions

5.2.1 What were commonalities in the significant others' experiences?

Table 5: Commonalities in experiences

	All participants	All parents	Both mothers	Leigh's parents
Commonalities in experience	• **Suspicion** • **Positive impacts acknowledged**	• **Acceptance - a difficult process**	• **Shared negative reactions** (*Guilt/Self-blame; Shame; Questioning parenting practices; Denial*) • **Search for answers** • **Wish for concealment** • **Fear of others' reactions** • **Perception of specific gay image**	• **Parental awareness of sexual orientation** • **Method of coming out difficult to accept** • **Strengthened family relationships** • **Acceptance and support**

5.2.1.1 All Significant Others

i. Suspicions present

During the research study I found that at some point in time, all research participants were suspicious of something - sexual orientation, a romantic infatuation or experimentation. All the participants identified as significant others had the experience of being suspicious. This corresponds with Aveline's (2006) findings that most parents suspected a same-gendered attraction in their children, although vague and unarticulated. Aveline (2006) mentions that at times it could just be an acknowledgement that something is *different*. I found the same result in my research study.

D'Augelli, Grossman and Starks (2005) mention that individuals may act in a certain way to increase awareness, to perhaps provoke inquiries that lead to disclosure. I found in my research study that a change in behaviour could also serve as a cue that could enhance feelings of suspicion and lead to disclosure. Rob was suspicious due to the way Allison talked about Leigh, and this made him suspect a relationship between them.

During the interviews participants related to me that, after their suspicions had been confirmed and they would reflect back on times they had suspected, but not truly understood. This agrees with findings in literature concerned with parental suspicion and at times a possible subconscious awareness that they did not discuss or acknowledge at the time (Saltzburg, 2004; Aveline, 2006; Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001).

ii. Positive impacts acknowledged

During the research study and interview with participants it became clear that significant others could acknowledge the positive impact and constructive growth they observed in both Allison and Leigh. Participants also commented

on how the relationship was beneficial and allowed both individuals to grow. Although most emphasis was placed on Leigh, in whose case positive implications of coming out were mentioned and Allison was included when the benefits of the relationship were discussed. Higher self-esteem, self-confidence, independence, seeming more comfortable as well as better interpersonal relationships were mentioned as positives by significant others. This supports findings in literature that coming out can be progressive and is associated with positive effects such as self-esteem; more open and supportive family relationships; a relief of stress for not having to keep the secret; renewed energy and better interpersonal relationships (Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz & Smith, 2001; Corrigan & Matthews, 2003; Ragins, 2008).

<u>5.2.1.2 Parents: Debra, Bronwyn and Chris</u>

i. Acceptance - a difficult process
Although parents have exhibited various reactions to their child's coming out, in the research I conducted during the research study, there were sources that indicated that most eventually arrive at tolerance or acceptance of their daughter's sexual orientation. This process is, however, not an easy one and is often described as a period of uncertainty and disruption within the family (Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998).

In my research study Bronwyn, Chris and Debra all stated during interviews that the process towards acceptance was not easy. They described it as difficult and at times lonely. Hillier (2002) found that in some cases parents react negatively to begin with and then gradually moved towards acceptance. Aveline (2006) mentions that recent literature provides few clues about how parents make sense of their child's past. However there is general agreement that acceptance is often difficult. This coincides with what the parents included in my study, expressed as having been their experience. Goldfried and Goldfried (2001) add that quite often making the decision to fully accept the sexual orientation of your child is difficult if not painful. Decisions such as Debra's to be strong for her mother as is shown in the example below can contribute to the difficult process. Saltzbutg (2004) mentions that some researchers have found that prior knowledge, educational programs and support groups may be important factors in parental adjustment and acceptance. However support structures were not readily in place and are still being created in the lives of these parents.

At times parents might conceal their true feelings "for the greater good" and have their own journey towards acceptance and disclosure. Goldfried and Goldfried (2001) state that for parents to come out themselves, they need to recognise and accept the fact that their daughter is gay/lesbian and that once this point has been reached completely, they can share this information with others. The parental process towards acceptance has not been represented much in research, with most research focusing on the reactions of parents or the consequences of disclosure. There are some, like Saltzburg (2004), that theorise that the process of acceptance for parents is similar to the grieving process or indeed similar to the coming out process This, however, is a research avenue that can be elaborated on at a later stage.

5.2.1.3 Mothers: Bronwyn and Debra

i. *Shared negative reactions and a search for answers*

Both Debra and Bronwyn mentioned to me that asking questions such as "what did I do wrong?", "what should I have done differently", "is this my fault?" formed part of their initial reactions to their daughters' sexual orientation. Both participants showed indications of blaming themselves, experiencing shame and questioning past parenting practices. These reactions support research discussed in Chapter 2 on how common initial reactions mentioned in literature (Savin-Williams, 1998; Hillier, 2002; Lasala, 2002; Aveline, 2006 ; Riley, 2010) included parents blaming themselves, feeling shame, questioning their parenting practices as they attempt to 'explain' or 'justify' what was happening.

A feeling of denial (whether before (Bronwyn) or after (Debra) disclosure) and a search for answers were experienced by both mothers. This could be attributed to the conflict between their love for their daughters being in conflict with their own or perceived societal negative biases toward homosexuality (Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001). The denial could also be attributed to a reaction in which parents feel that if they ignore the issue it will go away, as is described by Griffin, Wirth & Wirth (1996: 14) as *the ostrich effect*. In response to these reactions/experiences Aveline (2006) mentions that parents focus their examination of the past in a search for cause and at times further focus on guilt, shame, and self-blame. Searching for answers to their questions in this way forms part of the journey towards acceptance and gathering knowledge to understand what is happening.

Saltzburg (2004) mentions that a previous study showed that as parents increased their exposure to the homosexual community and gained knowledge of what the implications were of being a homosexual, their acceptance of their children's sexualities increased. The search for answers experienced by both Debra and Bronwyn is echoed in literature as part of the journey towards acceptance. Miller (2005) mentions the notion that an individual's fear of *something* decreases as knowledge of that *something* increases and this has very real implications when it comes to the disclosure of one's sexual orientation. Although both Debra and Bronwyn experienced negative feelings related to their daughter's sexual orientation, their search for answers could indicate a progressive step forward, as Lasala (2000) mentions that accurate information may enable parents to take a less rejecting view of their daughter's lesbianism.

ii. *Wish for concealment and fear of others' reactions*

Bronwyn and Debra both lived in communities where everyone knew everyone else. Questions like"what would people think?", "what would everyone say?" were mentioned. A wish to conceal the fact that their daughters were gay and then later that their daughters wanted to get married was expressed. They worried about what friends, relatives and the community would think if they heard. This supports Goldfried and Goldfried (2001) when they mention that parents worry about the perceptions of others if they were to find out. Furthermore in Gorman-Murray (2008) it is mentioned that the cultural discourse concerning gay/lesbian individuals at the time impacts on how parents perceive their child to be living by societal rules. Challenges expected upon disclosure and perceived/expected stigmatisation could also be a contributing factor to why parents remain silent. Debra and

Bronwyn both expected the judgement of others and Bronwyn had observed others' prejudice and judgemental comments on gay/lesbian individuals. Both mothers wanted to conceal the fact in an attempt at "carrying on as normal" to protect their children and themselves from society. Savin-Williams and Dube (1998) also mention that the wish to conceal could form part of the 'bargaining' stage of the grief process, giving parents an opportunity to come to terms with disclosure themselves before needing to involve outsiders.

Bronwyn and Debra are not only aware of society's judgement, but also feared the reactions of their own families, mothers and siblings. This contributed to their worry and the uncertainty of "not knowing how the family would react" and made them want to conceal their children's sexual orientation. Gorman-Murray (2008) writes that parents find that relaying the fact that their child is gay/lesbian to the rest of the family and community and their own fear of rejection and discrimination for their child and themselves was a challenge to them. Debra remembers thinking "okay, this is fine...just don't tell anyone" but this means they must cope with the strains of concealing or omitting their child's sexual orientation from others, which is a challenge in itself.

Debra and Bronwyn both saw their own mothers as vulnerable and as products of a conservative era. Bronwyn mentioned that her mother had been ill as well and that she did not feel ready to tell her. She had left that up to Leigh. Gran took it well and accepted both Leigh and Allison. Debra mentioned that she was unable to share her true feelings with her own mother, as there she had to be strong and an advocate for Allison, as her mother could not comprehend the fact that Allison was gay. Both parents had feared telling their own mothers and had noted the different reactions. This is congruent with what Griffin, Wirth and Wirth (1996) write when they say that usually parents fear telling their own parents due to fear of frailty and possible rejection. They also mention that the task of "informing the family" is usually placed on the shoulders of the parents and that no parent is alone in the experience of wrestling with questions concerning their families. They can withdraw from the family, say nothing and limit conversation or "open up their pain and consider new possibilities" (Griffin, Wirth & Wirth, 1996: 131).

The wedding placed additional pressure on Debra and Bronwyn as family members were invited and told, not necessarily by them, but at times by a wedding invitation. There is a gap in the literature relating to the systemic and family reactions/experiences regarding a lesbian wedding. In the research study both parents indicated that everyone who needed to be at the wedding was there and accepted it. However only Bronwyn mentioned that she was thankful for the wedding in a way as bonds with relatives and family members had been strengthened.

How society perceived and treated Allison and Leigh was an additional concern that Debra and Bronwyn shared. They acknowledge that their daughters have not chosen an easy path in life and that they felt Allison and Leigh would always need to justify and defend their love in the face of society's expectations, judgement and possible stigmatisation. As discussed in Chapter 2 society often overemphasises the expected norm of heterosexuality that most individuals are expected to adhere to. In order to cope with stress and escape the perceived and expected stigmatisation associated with being gay/lesbian, individuals may hide their orientation from family and friends

(Martin, 1982 as cited in Maguen, Floyd, Bakeman & Armistead, 2002). The same could be true here for Debra and Bronwyn, concealment being chosen over societal judgement aimed at them or their daughters.

They may perceive and react to discrimination which they expect from society (and perceived to be real), but which may not be conveyed by their environment. This *felt* or *expected* discrimination is then anticipated as a consequence of being gay/lesbian or having a child who is gay/lesbian. Debra and Bronwyn could fear and react to perceived stigma by evaluating the potential for discrimination (real or imagined), for their children or themselves, confirming the statement by Taylor (1999) on perceived and expected discrimination.

Most current literature I found (Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998; Lasala, 2000; Saltzburg, 2004 & Willoughby, Doty & Malik, 2008) focuses on the reactions and stages of parents. They look at the emotions and journey of the gay/lesbian individuals as they interact with society, but there is little research which focuses on the interactions of parents and societal expectations or judgements. The present research on this topic has mostly been undertaken by support groups or parents who band together to support others.

iii. Perception of specific gay image

In the research study it became evident that participants had a specific expectation of what being gay/lesbian meant and how a gay/lesbian individual looked. Debra mentioned that she had never expected Allison to be gay/lesbian because she looked so beautiful and feminine. Bronwyn stated that she had only been aware of butch, manly and gruff individuals that she had associated with the word 'lesbian'. A general acceptance of *differentness* and *looking* or *acting* in specific ways such as exhibiting atypical gender behaviour seemed to be characteristics associated with an expectation of homosexuality (D'Augelli, Grossman & Starks, 2005) and the gay image. Participants in the research study had a fixed perception of what *gay* looked like.

This is in agreement with what is written in Griffin, Wirth and Wirth (1996) when they state that one of the myths associated with coming out is that lesbian or gay individuals can be easily identified. They state that many individuals operate under the assumption that gay/lesbian individuals are not hidden. However as stated in Chapter 2, lesbians easily form part of an invisible minority. The fact that parents in the study still expected a specific stereotype indicates that there is still a lot of room for growth and understanding of what it means to be gay/lesbian. Society still views being gay/lesbian as fitting into a category and although organisations such as the Durban Lesbian and Gay Community and Health Centre, the Joint Working group, The Lesbian and Gay Equality Project and OUT LGBT Well-being, among others, battle stereotypes, there is still an ever present expectation of a specific stereotype.

5.2.1.4 Parents Bronwyn and Chris

i. Parental awareness of sexual orientation

Leigh's parents indicated that for them there was no one moment they had to be confronted with the fact that Leigh was gay/lesbian. For them it was a systematic growing awareness and journey towards acceptance of their

daughter. This is in agreement with what Saltzburg (2004) mentions that it appears that for parents who carried strong suspicions throughout childhood, a gradual accumulation of awareness supported their adjustment after disclosure. Bronwyn and Chris mention specific life experiences that helped them to accept Leigh as she was. Faced with their daughter's struggle for self-acceptance in a clinic, seeing her struggle with depression and her observed atypical gender traits or behaviours and acknowledged *differentness* from other little girls had in a way prepared them and made them aware of Leigh's sexual orientation. Gorman-Murray (2008) also felt that for some parents past life experiences impacted their acceptance and reactions to their child's disclosure. Atypical behaviour observed and mentioned by participants supports literature that argues that gender atypicality in childhood could lead to parents being more aware (D'Augelli, Grossman & Stark, 2006; Aveline, 2006). Parents' prior life experiences shape their responses to their children's disclosures (Savin-Williams 1989, 1998 in Gorman-Murray, 2008).

In this specific case their awareness and the life experiences mentioned impacted on them to the extent where they came out *for* Leigh. They became aware of the necessity for them to verbalise their awareness of Leigh's sexual identity to assist and benefit her. Hillier (2002) also states that some individuals never make a decision to come out, but are pushed out due to circumstances. In Leigh's case her parents were aware and felt that it was time to let her know they were *okay* with it. They just did not want to lose her. Chris and Bronwyn both state that although it was not easy, it was not a shock. As they looked back they knew that Leigh was gay/lesbian. Chris states that it was not a shock for him when Leigh disclosed that she and Allison were in a relationship. As a family they had known and accepted this fact. In this study therefore Leigh's parents had come out for her. The situation had, they felt, called for this to happen and it was beneficial to them to do so.

When looking back both Chris and Bronwyn wished that they had communicated earlier about their suspicions to each other and spoken more openly to Leigh about sexual identity. However they avoided the topic and felt that this was wrong. They are not alone in avoiding this topic of discussion as sex-related talks usually focus on development, safety and morality and almost never focus on the sex of the partner (Hillier, 2002). Leigh's parents express the regret for not communicating about this earlier as many problems could have been avoided. Hillier (2002) also mentions that communication and even asking if a child is gay/lesbian is good strategy if parents are prepared to accept an answer that might go either way, including if it went against their own beliefs, hopes or expectations on the subject. The study shows that atypical gender behaviour, past life experiences as well as parental awareness could help ease coming out for gay/lesbian individuals and the journey towards acceptance for parents. More research is, however, necessary to fully investigate these factors.

ii. Method of coming out (couple disclosure) difficult to accept
During the interview with Bronwyn and Chris both shared the view that Leigh and Allison acknowledging their relationship did not shock them since they had accepted this fact already. However the way in which Leigh shared the information with them was more difficult to accept. They described it as somewhat blunt and immediately defensive, as if no thought had been put into what she wanted to say. Although both parents admitted that they did

not think Leigh meant the message to come across as rude or blunt, but rather that she did not know how else to put it.

Literature (Saltzburg, 2004; Miller, 2005) mentions that the coming out is not only an important moment for the child coming out, but indeed a defining moment for the parents as well. The moment is as much about the disclosure recipient as it is about the discloser and that the timing of non-verbal and verbal cues mattered (Miller, 2005). The experience of Leigh's parents' supports this statement and also shows that the act of disclosure and how it is done matter to parents. The act of disclosure is viewed as the first step to a new relationship and a journey towards a more open relationship. Miller (2005) mentions that the emotional tone of a message has a direct bearing on the manner in which the recipient receives, and responds to the message. The actual wording and important elements of the coming out act constitute yet another area in research where most focus has been placed on the individual coming out and how parents experience the actual act is not found frequently in literature. Elements that may have an impact on how the disclosure message is received are discussed by Miller (2005), but there is still a gap where research on this matter is concerned, it can be investigated further, not just to investigate the reactions to the disclosure message, but the impact of how it is said.

iii. Acceptance and support
Parental acceptance can be viewed as a protective factor and positive influence as it has been associated with an array of positive outcomes for gay/lesbian individuals such as relationship satisfaction, positive peer relationships, and the development of pro-social behaviour (Rohner, Rohner, Khaleque, & Cournoyer, 2004 as cited in Gorman-Murray 2008). Throughout interviews and secondary data Bronwyn and Chris expressed their love and acceptance of Leigh. Bronwyn shared past experiences with family, when parents had not been supportive of their daughter's wedding and said that she could never hurt her daughter that way. Life experience again played a part in the acceptance process here. In this research study I found that not only negative reactions and experiences were found. Positive and supportive reactions are also present and should be considered as well. Often literature focuses on the negative reactions and consequences. However more focus is necessary on the positive and constructive resolutions of coming out. I agree with Gorman-Murray (2008) that rather than suggesting that heterosexual parents will oppose the sexual orientation of their children it must considered that parents too can choose to oppose the hetero-norm and accept their children or demonstrate their support. Parents can do this through positive responses to coming out. Literature concerned with lesbian weddings and parental reactions, attitudes, involvement or experiences related to this is sparse. This is an avenue of research which, possibly due to such weddings only being legalised a few years ago, still needs to be explored.

iv. Strengthened family relationships
The family could progress from a level of awareness of the individuals' sexual orientation, to coming to terms with this realisation and adjusting to it (Carr, 2006) leading to a family in which all members feel valued and accepted for whom they are and not how well they fit into the mould of a heterosexual society. Leigh's parents reported improved family relationships, specifically between Leigh and Bronwyn. This supports findings in a study conducted by Ben-

Ari (1995 in Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998) where it was found that in general, 84% of mothers and 63% of fathers reported an improved relationship with their gay/lesbian child after disclosure..

Improved relationships were not limited to immediate family, but were also evident between the family and extended family/relatives. Bronwyn related how her relationship with her sister and brother had been strengthened throughout the experience. Relationship bonds have been strengthened and a support network has become available to her, where she knew they were all accepted without being judged.

This emphasises literature discussed in Chapter 2 stating that coming out to family can also lead to various positive and constructive reactions such as renewed energy and decreased stress levels due to breaking the secrecy. Family identity as well as true individual identity can also be integrated and developed so that family cohesion is improved. Higher self esteem, as observed in both Leigh and Allison, and better interpersonal connections also have an impact on family interaction and may lead to less role conflict, better communication and a greater feeling of trust and stability. This contributes to building towards improved family relationships and a larger support network for individuals who disclose, and their significant others during the coming out process.

5.2.2 What were the unique experiences of significant others

Table 6: Unique experiences

	Bronwyn	Chris	Debra	Rob
Unique experience	• Poor mother-daughter relationship • Love and thankful for Allison • Lonely journey to acceptance • Normalisation helps acceptance	• Never expected or wanted confrontation	• Assumption of heterosexuality • Acknowledged need to be accepted • Understanding vs. emotional reactions • In line with own experience • Emotions • Helping others towards acceptance	• Provide access to sub-culture, support and acceptance • Push necessary for disclosure • Supportive ally relationships

5.2.2.1 Bronwyn (Mother)

i. Poor mother - daughter relationship
Findings in a study conducted by Butler and Astbury (2008) concluded that participants observed that *particular family patterns of support and dysfunction* were established long before issues related to sexual identity struggles had the opportunity to shape those patterns. Families and friends could fulfil supportive or destructive roles.

Bronwyn mentioned that in the past, specifically during Leigh's adolescent years their relationship was not very open and communicative. This made it difficult for Bronwyn to approach and talk to Leigh. Family patterns before disclosure could impact on communication and support access to individuals

ii. Love and thankful for Allison

Bronwyn and Chris both mentioned that they accepted Allison as part of their family. Bronwyn mentioned especially that Allison battled with some of the stereotypical ideas that she had concerning what gay/lesbian individuals should look like. Parents can exhibit support because they prefer their daughters' girlfriend to a past relationship or see that the current relationship has a positive effect on their daughter (Savin-Williams and Dube, 1998). Bronwyn and Chris do not necessarily prefer Allison to a past relationship, but did acknowledge the positive effects they have observed in their daughter since being in a relationship with Allison. They accepted Allison and showed that family can feel positive towards partners of their gay/lesbian child. Research regarding relationships and experiences between partners and family need to be explored further in future.

iii. Lonely journey to acceptance

For parents to come out themselves, Goldfried and Goldfried (2001) state that they need to recognise and accept the fact that their daughter is gay/lesbian. This requires time and corrective experiences as well as a total reorganisation of one's expectations and values. On the way to acceptance, in this research study, Bronwyn experienced the journey as very lonely and felt isolated at times. As a family they never discussed Leigh's sexual orientation or their suspicions during earlier years. Bronwyn and Chris never even discussed it with each other.

Bronwyn mentioned an incident with friends, who were unaware of Leigh's sexual orientation and who were making negative and unfounded remarks regarding gay/lesbian individuals. She felt guilt for not standing up for her daughter, but also just "did not know what to say or how to react". She had not felt that what they were saying was right, but also was not ready to share information. This could indicate that although Bronwyn accepted and supported Leigh, she herself was not ready to come out as a parent of a gay/lesbian child at the time. Gorman-Murray (2008) state that their Australian narratives revealed that just as young people can choose to come out against the "hetero-norm", parents too can do the same**.** First they needed to reach a point where they felt able to do this - lack of communication with others left Bronwyn feeling lonely and guilty.

Isolation is mentioned by Savin-Williams and Dube (1998) as part of the stages of grieving parents' progress through towards adjustment after disclosure. Quam (1990 in Taylor, 1999) suggests that the individual (and I would argue that parents be included here) experience the crossing of a boundary in the sense that they feel *different* from the rest and as a result they experience isolation. Griffin, Wirth, and Wirth (1996) emphasise that the process of acceptance is very much an ongoing one and involves various levels: Whenever a parent is able to say, "I have a gay or lesbian child" to anyone outside the immediate family, there is an underlying message: "As his or her parent, whatever befalls my child befalls me. I will fight for my child, for we are intertwined in our history and in our love for each other. My child is not alone. I stand up for him or her (p. 118).

Bronwyn later shared her experience and situation with a friend at work who had also had a daughter who was gay/lesbian. She reported a sense of relief to tell someone. Having someone who understood and could support her gave her a sense of relief and was also someone with whom she could talk. The wedding plans had also *forced* disclosure about Leigh to the rest of the family. This, as mentioned earlier, resulted in enhancing bonds and renewed relationships, providing Bronwyn with a support network of individuals, making the journey much less lonely.

Research refers to positive implications of coming out and in this research study I found that these were not only limited to the gay/lesbian individuals, but to parents as well. Better interpersonal relationships are created due to lack of secrecy (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003) and individuals may experience a sense of renewed energy, after the need for secrecy has been eliminated. Individuals also feel a relief from stress for not having to keep a secret as an integral part of their identity (Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz & Smith, 2001; Ragins, 2008).

Goldfried and Goldfried (2001) suggest that acceptance is very much in the form of a process for family members. This can vary in time even when thinking that they have accepted their gay child, an event may arise that tells them further change is needed. For Bronwyn this was evident when Leigh and Allison got engaged. At first she wanted to avoid talking or acknowledging this fact, reverting back to the *ostrich effect* mentioned earlier. Bronwyn also related that for her the term *lesbian* is still difficult to use and has a negative association in her opinion, not one that she relates to Leigh. Bronwyn might still be on the path towards acceptance and demonstrates that it is not a linear progression of stages, but rather a movement between various experiences and lessons.

iv. Normalisation helps acceptance
Savin-Williams (1998) mentions that encouraging the individual to share the history of same sex attractions and discuss feelings and concerns will start to normalise her sexuality as well as the parent child alliance. This could be a first step towards building a stronger and more open relationship and growing towards a positive and honest relationship. After disclosure Bronwyn mentioned that there were specific factors that battled with the specific idea of what gay/lesbian was for her.

There were factors which Bronwyn had mentioned that helped her gain a better perspective on the experience, such as having her other children speak about friends they knew who were also gay/lesbian; seeing a celebrity on television who was lesbian; becoming aware that there were other parents who had experienced the same feelings and questions as he did and talking to her friend who had gone through something similar.

Savin-Williams (2001) suggests that younger parents are more familiar with modern portrayals of sexual minorities or may be more influenced by non-traditional cultural ideas, leading to greater acceptance of their own same-sex-attracted children. I do not argue this fact, but I would add that interaction with their other children, being exposed to media and current literature would also assist in the normalisation of their experience, assisting their process

towards acceptance. This supports Taylor (1999) when stating that contact with homosexual subculture can validate and normalise homosexuality as a way of life.

<u>5.2.2.2 Chris (Father)</u>

i. Never experienced or wanted confrontation

In this research study Chris mentioned that as a family, they never had a huge confrontation or blow out. He mentioned that this was mainly because they came out for Leigh. They had their suspicions and they knew. The depression was also a factor. Leigh's struggle and their fear as parents that they could lose her made the decision to accept her without a confrontation easy. In a sense it was either to accept her or lose her. He stated that their acceptance of Leigh was complete and that there was never a need for a fight. Supporting research findings (D'Augelli, Grossman & Starks, 2005; Lasala, 2000) which indicate that aware parents have been 'through the worst' and that parental responses and reactions were not always negative, could be viewed in a positive and accepting light.

<u>5.2.2.3 Debra (Mother)</u>

i. Assumption of heterosexuality and acknowledged need to be accepted

Through Debra's accounts it became clear that she had merely assumed and expected, as most parents do (Hillier, 2002), that Allison was heterosexual. She talked about how this image was perpetuated by society, through the media and images that they portrayed as normal – the picture of the husband, wife and their children. She also acknowledged that society is changing towards a more female-dominated society, but that to be accepted into the norm you still needed to play by the rules of a heterosexual world. The heterosexual presumption appears to be a system of knowledge under which people operate that has been formed through time and repetitive actions, generating meanings from which the system can draw to apply to various situations (Aveline, 2006). This supports Debra's experience of society perpetuating heterosexuality, and it would be normal for her to assume heterosexuality as this was the main discourse within which she has operated throughout life.

This is similar to the views on what is natural and normal sexuality pervading society (Weeks 1986). Through patterned interaction, heterosexual development has become the assumed standard of social order, and homosexual development a less travelled path outside that order (Aveline, 2006). Homosexual self-labelling involves ascribing to oneself a non-normative trait and represents a form of abnormality (Taylor, 1999). This in turn could add to the conflict experienced by parents between the love for their daughter and constructed negative biases toward homosexuality and desire for social acceptance on the other hand (Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001). This would suggest that a change in expectations held that children must be heterosexual to be accepted into society and seen as normal was necessary. Societal changes in that children could be seen as growing up *straight* or *gay* and not just assumed to be *straight* could make the process easier for parents. Although society is changing, this change is slow and the predominant heterosexual culture has a negative impact on the journey towards acceptance for individuals such as Debra.

ii. Understanding vs. emotional reactions

During the study Debra mentioned that she had always been supportive of the gay/lesbian cause. However, her daughter did not fit into her idea of what being a lesbian was. She was not man-like and there had been men who were interested in her. During the study it seemed that her emotional reaction to her daughters' disclosure might not yet have been consolidated with what she knew about homosexuality. Debra also mentioned that she had read books about strong, independent women.

The research study found that for Debra there were specific prerequisites that made being a lesbian *more okay*. Older women who were lonely and had found each other late in life, women whose husbands had passed away or had left them, found solace in each other's arms or artistic people who were not bound by conventional standards. These were acceptable scenarios to her, but she could not consolidate these images with her daughter.

This could be due to her experience of cultural and society's expectations of heterosexuality and complying with the norm (Jackson, 2006; Kitzinger, 2005) in Martin, Hutson, Kazyak & Schrerrer, 2010). Heteronormativity raises questions regarding what it meant to be a man or woman, straight or gay, and what individuals and society associated with these labels.

iii. In line with own experience

Debra mentioned that she had also had had a lesbian experience in her youth. She had chosen differently from Allison and this made it more difficult to understand why Allison could not have done the same. She mentioned "coming to my senses". She disregarded her belief of being lesbian and returned to the normal life awaiting her. The experience of her daughter could follow on with a previous experience she had had, when she had chosen differently and could also have contributed to her examining parts of her own past and personality. In this instance her daughter's experience could cause her to question her own past actions and decisions as well as motivations.

Debra mentioned that she was not yet ready to write her own narrative as she was still working through parts of her experiences. She could still possibly be involved in her own process towards acceptance. It would be informative to discuss the impact and various factors regarding Debra's personal past experiences. However these discourses do not form part of the scope of my research question and will not be discussed in greater detail. Debra's personal discourses or others with such past experiences could be included in future research.

iv. Emotions:

Robinson, Walters, and Skeen (1989 in Willoughby, Doty & Malik, 2008) found in their survey that two thirds of mothers reported negative responses and described the reaction as grief-like. These findings are echoed by Lasala (2000) who describes some parental reactions as following the Kùbler-Ross's five-stage grieving process. Savin-Williams and Dube (1998 & Saltzburg, 2004) also discuss the parental grieving process beginning with shock, moving through denial, sadness, bargaining and anger to eventual acceptance. Although I would not necessarily argue that *all* parents follow this process as was seen in the experience of Bronwyn and Chris and was supported

by literature discussed earlier, indicating positive reactions to disclosure. Debra did mention that to her the experience of Allison's coming out felt grief-like in the period after disclosure.

She experienced feelings of disappointment at the loss of her dreams for her daughter. She had just expected and hoped that Allison was heterosexual and would be accepted by society. This echoes the experience of two parents reported in Lasala (2000) that needed to mourn the loss of 'their daughter the heterosexual' and Mahoney's (1994 in Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998) statement that parents mourn the loss of the heterosexual dreams they had for their child. Saltzburg (2004) also found that feelings of loss, emotional dissonance and guilt were predominantly experienced and influential to parental adjustment.

During the study Debra mentioned her utter shock that her nymph, Allison, would come out to her. This was her first reaction, one of shock. This could be the start of her grieving process as this was her initial and first reaction. Debra mentioned that she then hoped that Allison was experimenting and that this phase would pass and Allison would then 'go on living her life'. She experienced denial as Savin-Williams and Dube (1998) describe parents hoping the phase would pass and the belief that by not acknowledging this it would disappear. Debra stated that at some stage she just wished for some normality, even bargaining with Allison:

"and then, I mean, she could always cheat with women later" (Debra).

The statement above again could possibly indicate Debra's own experience of possible inner conflict relating to heteronormative expectations of society, cultural expectations and the perception of homosexuality being regarded as incongruent with the values of heterosexuality. The conceptualisation of heterosexuality and what this means in society and in cultural terms is still an area for possible future research.

She mentioned that this was her hope that change or alternative actions would help Allison change her mind. She bargained with Allison while experiencing this stage of the grieving process. During the bargaining/hope stage Debra also wanted to conceal this aspect of family life and not involve society, She feared what would happen if everyone in the community knew. This is in correlation with the descriptive behaviours associated with the parental grieving process mentioned in literature (Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998; Lasala, 2000). In the study I realised that there were no specific indications of when a phase had begun or ended, but rather that Debra moved between stages of the grieving process, returning to different stages at different times. She was still working towards full acceptance, but also shared a wish for some distance to become her own person again.

When reflecting on Allison's disclosure Debra mentioned that there had never been a huge confrontation, no big blowout. She did not want to lose or reject her child. She did, however, wish that there had been such an opportunity, perhaps one big confrontation. Goldfried and Goldfried (2001) state that parents blame themselves wondering where they went wrong, but they may also fear for the wellbeing of their child and what is in store for her.

Anger and resentment could also be present in the reactions and experiences of parents, asking inwardly how their child could do this to them. These feelings might have crystallised for Debra into a wish for a confrontation where everything could be said and all emotions aired. This could have formed part of the anger stage but retaining elements of bargaining, wishing for that one last conversation that might change everything. What may also have exacerbated the situation is that she did not feel a connection with Leigh or saw how she fitted into their family.

Debra knew that she was powerless to change Allison's decision about her life and she also acknowledged that Allison's union with Leigh was permanent, but she was still working through the process of parental adjustment towards acceptance.

v. Helping others towards acceptance
As mentioned earlier the task of telling the family is often laid on the shoulders of the parents. What this entails and how this affects parents and the rest of the family has not been examined in detail. However it would be a good avenue to explore in research. Debra having shared Allison's disclosure with her own mother, now felt obliged to defend and explain her daughter's choice and decision to her own mother. This was not an easy task as she was still coming to terms and moving towards acceptance herself. Additional pressure had been placed on her to "help others towards acceptance". This could support findings which indicate that parents follow the same process as coming out for gay/lesbian individuals, but for Debra instead of concealment she had chosen the facade of complete acceptance to support her daughter and to guide her mother towards acceptance.

5.2.2.4. Rob (Friend)

i. Provide access to subculture, support and acceptance
Rob mentioned that he was Allison's 'second best option' for disclosure, because she wanted to chat to the girls. He understood that it might have been less daunting to disclose to a friend who was also gay. This aligns with research which indicates that there is evidence that gay/lesbians are more likely to disclose their identity to gay/lesbian friends than to heterosexual friends, family, or co-workers (Bradford, Ryan, & Rothblum, 1994 in Morris, 1997). This might be because they felt more assured of acceptance and understanding from their gay/lesbian friends than from their heterosexual friends, family or co-workers. Rob mentioned that he felt flattered at being told first.

Theory and research (e.g. Cass, 1979, 1996; D'Augelli, 1996; Fox, 1995; Herdt & Boxer, 1993; Savin-Williams, 1995; Troiden, 1989 as referenced in Floyd & Stein, 2002) indicate that social contact with other gay/lesbian individuals can help individuals come to terms with a self-definition of sexual orientation identity. Contact provides social support to cope with the stigma experienced, feelings of alienation from the hetero-social world and personal questions. This is similar to Rob's experience. He mentioned that their close friendship facilitated many discussions regarding love and sexuality and created a non-judgemental space in which Allison could talk, debate feelings and behaviours and come to terms with her own perceptions and fears about society. Rob mentioned that during their discussions it became clear that Allison struggled between what she wanted and what she perceived was expected

of her in the heterosexual society we lived in. He mentioned that it took a few years and many discussions before Allison could accept her own identity and choices.

Rob mentioned that Allison would accompany him to gay clubs and would spend time with him and his friends, gaining entry into the gay world without fear of being judged as he could be her *alibi*. Coming out to others can allow individuals to gain access to a culture and community of like-minded and accepting people, where they feel welcome and "they experienced a sense of self-recognition, and most quickly aligned themselves with new potential identities" (Gagne, Tewksbury & McGaughey, 1997: 490). Entry into this subculture can also provide gay/lesbian individuals with a support network which forms part of much needed support that they cannot gain from elsewhere such as an environment where they can freely experiment, search for guidance or answers and come to terms with their gay/lesbian identity without ridicule. In this research study Rob was one of the individuals who provided guidance and assistance to Allison during her coming out process. Having someone to communicate and discuss issues with, who had dealt with some similar issues and could assist an individual in their coming out process, by being a *mentor* to talk to, someone who shows acceptance and support with added life experience.

ii. Push necessary for disclosure

In the research study Rob mentioned in our interview that he wondered if Allison would ever have come out if their friend had not walked in on them. He stated that although the concealment was causing stress and strain, he believed everyone needed that extra push to disclose. Various factors that Rob mentioned could have been a reason to disclose, the permanence of the relationship, the wish to get married, the fear that family would find out from the wrong people and the wish to leave the lies behind and stop with the concealment. This links with with what Riley (2010) says, that individuals disclosed to their families for several reasons (e.g. because "it was time", to elicit support or because they feared their father/families would learn from someone else). The positive implications of coming out discussed earlier in chapter 2 could also have played a part in the decision to disclose. Positive implications could include renewed energy due to not having to keep secrets and decreased stress levels as well as a wish for authentic and honest interpersonal relationships. Hillier (2002) mentions that some people never make the decision to come out, but are pushed out due to circumstances, which is what happened in this case.

iii. Supportive ally relationships

Rob mentions his own experience of straight friends' reactions, which were mostly related to wondering why Allison felt the need to hide this. Allison and Rob both mentioned that Allison and Leigh spent most of their time in the company of their heterosexual friends where they found their support. Ragins (2008) mentions that supportive ally relationships can provide various forms of support for disclosure and may include relationships with friends. To then gain access to the support of this group of allies, disclosure becomes somewhat of a necessity.

Straight friends can contribute to stress or can become allies during the coming out process. They can also move from one to the other. Allies are known as such because they show their support in visible ways. The gay/lesbian rights movement has been unique in offering individuals the title of allies for joining the group and demonstrating support (Cortese, 2006 as cited in Stotzer, 2009). From what Rob, Leigh and Allison shared throughout the

research study this was confirmed as friends reacted (in a continuum from positive to negative) but ultimately showed their support and acceptance.

Diamond and Lucas (2004) found that the gay/lesbian females who came out to heterosexual peers had a larger peer network than those who did not, but also ran the risk of experiencing greater fears and loss of friendship. The degree of disclosure to family and friends is significantly related to an overall level of social support. Specifically being out to friends, whether straight or gay/lesbian, was the best predictor of overall social support (Jordan & Deluty, 1998). This was also seen in my research study as was evident by the large social support system Leigh and Allison had. Rob commented on everyone's support and excitement for both Leigh and Allison as individuals, as a couple and for their wedding.

5.3 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I examined and discussed the combined and unique experiences of significant others, thus making sense of the narratives in Chapter 4. In the following chapter I will discuss the conclusions of the research study, the limitations of the research study and possible avenues of future research.

Chapter 6: Final Thoughts

6.1 Introduction

In Chapter 4 I presented the data as narratives and in Chapter 5 I examined the experiences of significant others through further analysis and interpretation. In this chapter I will provide a brief overview of the research study and discuss my final conclusions.

6.2 Research overview

Chapter 1 provided an introductory orientation of the research study. A general overview of my research problem and rationale for undertaking the study was given. I also stated the purpose of the research study, research questions and provided clarification of the key concepts including significant others, the coming out process, gay/lesbian Individuals, what experience entails, homophobia, sexual orientation and gender identity. A brief overview was given of my research design and methodology as well as the paradigm within which the study was conducted. Finally ethical considerations and quality criteria relevant to the study were mentioned.

In **Chapter 2** I explored relevant literature to provide background for the research study and discuss my theoretical framework. I discuss *the coming out process* as viewed in current and past literature. I also look at the meaning of *significant others*, the roles they play in the lives of gay/lesbian individuals as shown in literature and lastly I consider *experience* and what this term involves. However the literature base relating to gay/lesbian experiences within South Africa is limited and therefore in this chapter I rely heavily on international studies, specifically USA and UK articles. The articles utilised do however provide globalised information necessary and appropriate to the research study. The main focus of my research study is on the experiences of significant others. However the bulk of current literature focuses on the coming out process from the individual's point of view. Therefore I have utilised this as well by creating a context in which my research study, the experience of significant others can be understood as it relates to the specific context and current literature. I also mention the theoretical framework which underlies my research study, namely systems theory.

Chapter 3 discusses the framework for the qualitative research methodology. Attention is given to the interpretive paradigm I chose, my combination of case study research design enhanced by narrative elements. I also elaborated on the methodology I utilised to collect, analyse interpret my data and my role as researcher in this study. I explore the quality criteria I endeavoured to implement to ensure the rigour of my study as well as the relevant ethical considerations.

Chapter 4 represented the personal narratives of each participant as they relayed their experience. Thus serving as a representation of each participants own story and voice. In **Chapter 5** the narratives of significant others were examined more closely and common and unique experiences were discussed to provide meaning to the narratives

represented in Chapter 4. In this chapter I will present my conclusions drawn from the results of the research study undertaken.

6.3 Final conclusion regarding primary research question

My research study was guided by the primary research question:"***How do significant others experience the coming out process of a lesbian individual?"*** The purpose of my research study was to explore and describe the experiences of significant others during the coming out process of a lesbian individual. I gathered additional detail regarding how various individuals experience the coming out process to provide further insight into the process and possibly inform theory and practice. I conducted interviews and generated secondary data to enrich my data. I then constructed stories to showcase the unique voices of my participants, describing each participant's unique experience.

Based on the results obtained there were various experiences that played a part in the coming out process for significant others. New and unexpected themes emerged which were not discussed in Chapter 2, but were supported by relevant research in Chapter 5. There were experiences that were common among participants. However there were also experiences that were unique to individuals in the research study. These experiences have been discussed earlier in this chapter. These findings seem to indicate that there are commonalities in the experiences of significant others. This could indicate that to some extent process/stage theories could be utilised effectively in the support of significant others during the coming out process, but they must not be rigidly applied and the assumption of a linear progression should never be adopted.

There are experiences which overlap, as well as others that show that systems interact. However individuals also have their own journey and unique experiences, shown in the stories in Chapter 4 and the experiences discussed above. I agree with Savin-Williams (2001: 13) as he writes in "Mom, Dad. I'm Gay" that the perspective that each person is unique is often lost in scientific presentations of data. I have endeavoured to discuss the unique journey and experiences of my various participants as they relate to the coming out process and journey for each individual. Sexual minority individuals are not always searching for an identical tale to their own to assist in alleviating feelings of isolation and alienation (Savin-Williams, 2001). Narrative accounts and unique discussions serve an invaluable purpose and have to be acknowledged in research for applicability to individuals and family as well as professional utilisation. Each individual had a unique understanding and process that they experienced and was currently involved in. Significant others attached different meanings to various moments and also constructed meanings together (as can be seen between Bronwyn and Chris). From the discussions of experiences and through what I have learnt in this research study I summarise the experiences of the significant others in my research study under the following statements:

- Some form of suspicion / awareness is present before disclosure
- Emotional reactions vary between positive, neutral and negative

- Disclosure is viewed and experienced both as a crisis and as a progressive experience.
- Various factors could influence the experience of the coming out process for significant others.
- There are various stages towards acceptance (individuals fall in a continuum and can move forward and backward).
- Different factors influence the journey towards acceptance.

The statements above serve as a summary for the experiences of the significant others in this research study and need to be explored further in order for greater detail to become apparent. The statements above are the blanket categories for the experiences recorded but do not distinguish between unique and common experiences of the individuals as they are aimed at the group as they took part in the research study and shared their experiences.

6.4 Final conclusions regarding secondary research questions

6.4.1 How does the lesbian individual experience her own coming out process?

The experiences of the individuals, Leigh and Allison, were not the main research focus. They were contextual and necessary to understand the experiences of the significant others, but the data collected from them was not analysed to this in-depth level to extract specific experiences. Thus their journeys and experiences are captured in the narratives represented in Chapter 4 and will not be elaborated on further.

6.4.2 How does a family member experience the coming out process of a lesbian individual?

In Chapter 5 I discussed the commonalities in experiences and the unique experiences of each participant identified as a significant other. Experiences were found that links up with the literature mentioned in Chapter 2 as well as new experiences that were discussed and supported with relevant literature in Chapter 5. The family members who were identified by Leigh and Allison were their parents. All parents acknowledged that the journey towards acceptance was/is not an easy process for them, and this was their main shared experience. Their individual and partially shared experiences, as discussed in Chapter 5, are represented in Table 7 and Table 8 below.

Table 7: Shared experiences of family members

	Both mothers	Leigh's parents
Experiences	• **Shared negative reactions (**_Guilt/Self-blame; Shame; Questioning parenting practices; Denial_**)** • **Search for answers** • **Wish for concealment** • **Fear of others' reactions** • **Perception of specific gay image**	• **Parental awareness of sexual orientation** • **Method of coming out difficult to accept** • **Strengthened family relationships** • **Acceptance and support**

Table 8: Unique experiences of parents

	Bronwyn	Chris	Debra
Experiences	• Poor mother-daughter relationship • Love and thankful for Allison • Lonely journey to acceptance • Normalisation helps acceptance	• Never expected or wanted confrontation	• Assumption of heterosexuality • Acknowledged need to be accepted • Understanding vs. emotional reactions • In line with own experience • Emotions • Helping others towards acceptance

6.4.3 How does a peer experience the coming out process of a friend?

Rob was indicated as being a peer, whom Allison specifically identified as a significant other. His shared experiences were discussed as part of the conclusions regarding the primary research question. Rob however also had three unique experiences that were discussed in Chapter 5. The experiences are shown in Table 9 below.

Table 9: Experiences of a peer

	Rob
Experiences	• Provide access to subculture, support and acceptance • Push necessary for disclosure • Supportive ally relationships

6.5 Limitations of the Study

I have identified possible limitations/challenges. Firstly I was concerned about the possible impact of researcher bias as I was the single researcher in the field subjected to my own perceptions, personality and thought processes. Although this might appear to be a limitation as interpretive researcher, within the qualitative design I have acknowledged that I cannot be seen apart from my research, that as researcher I formed part of the process. I did not strive for objectivity, but strove to gain a greater understanding of the experiences of others. I also attempted to battle any possible researcher bias, through members checking during which my participants had the opportunity to validate my interpretation of their experiences. I also had ongoing interaction with my supervisor and reflected in my research diary to gain perspective.

Secondly my research study only examined one case involving a variety of participants. My findings cannot be generalised and can only be truly applied in this context. Generalising findings were not the aim of this research study. I wished to explore the experiences of significant others throughout the coming out process to gain better understanding of what that might entail. Further research would be required to generalise findings.

Thirdly the research study can only account for what it set out to investigate. I aimed to explore significant others' experiences from their perspective. I was, therefore, limited by the information that participants were willing to share with me. All participants gave consent for what they understood me to be doing during this research study and chose to participate. Although this may be a limitation, the aim was to gather the experiences of significant others and therefore I chose to trust and rely on the information provided by them.

Fourthly I acknowledge that my assumptions or preconceived notions may have been a limitation. However I reflected on possible assumptions in discussions with my supervisor and in my research diary to keep an open mind, however diligently writing in my research diary proved to be difficult at times. Member checking, multiple data gathering sources and reflection helped me to be aware of my assumptions and to focus on the data gathered as my source of analysis and not my own assumptions.

Fifthly my data generation methods provided me with much raw data and a lengthy data analysis process. Transcriptions done by an outside company assisted in coping with time constraints. The fact that only one case was used meant that a lengthy and in-depth data analysis could be undertaken. The fact that it was time-consuming added some value to the research study. I am however not an experienced researcher and thus my inexperience counted against me. Furthermore due to the lengthy process of data analysis I could not return to my data as often as I would have liked.

Next, the utilisation of a digital voice recorder could have impacted on my interaction with the participants. However, I also kept notes on informal conversations and saved electronic communications throughout the research study. I familiarised participants with the voice recorder before interviews in an attempt to make it less threatening.

Remaining the researcher was difficult for me at times as I am an educational psychologist and when interviews became emotionally charged, it was difficult to remain only a researcher and not to assume the role of therapist. However, when the lines seemed somewhat softer this added to the positive relationship between me and my research participants by helping them to feel more comfortable in sharing their stories with me although I admit that roles did overlap at times due to my inexperience as researcher.

I acknowledge that the research may be biased somewhat due to the nature of the research topic. Only participants comfortable discussing their experience were involved, as participation in the research study was voluntary. I can

only reflect the experience of those participants willing to share their journey with me - this is evident in most research where sensitive topics are investigated and research involving same sex attracted individuals, is no exception. I also chose to focus my research study on lesbian women as a group and not to include bisexual individuals. This was a possibility as Allison identifies herself more as bisexual at times, however this felt too broad for the current research study and was therefore not included in the study.

Finally during the writing of first person narratives it was my own interpretation of data and stories related to me which led me to constructing the narratives and my own subjectivity could, therefore, influence the emphasis placed on specific events. I attempted to use participants' own words as collected during interviews and where possible also utilised personal narratives written by participants themselves. Here I relied mainly on the process of member checking and involving my participants as co-researchers in the process to ensure that my narrative accounts were as accurate as possible to attempt to minimise my own subjective voice taking the place of the significant others' experiences.

6.6 Directions for Future Research

I suggest the following directions for future research:
- In-depth investigation of an entire family circle, close and extended family to investigate experiences and perceptions involved on a larger scale.
- Investigation into more cases to investigate commonality of experiences during the coming out process.
- Collecting narrative accounts from other individuals involved in the coming out process not mentioned in this research study - employers, co-workers, siblings, grandparents.
- Investigating what the stereotypical gay image means in perceptions of coming out and being out.
- Exploring the meanings that others ascribe to a same sex marriage (family, friends, community)
- Investigating the post-disclosure adjustment of parents and family members
- Exploring the experiences of parents' disclosure of a child's sexual orientation
- A deeper investigation into factors that influence reactions and experiences during the coming out process.
- Research focussed on interactions of parents with society and societal expectations or judgements.
- Research focussed on what it means to be seen as gay/lesbian and what the current stereotypes are.
- Not only focussing on gay/lesbian individuals but expanding research to include lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals (LGBT) further.

6.7 Possible Contributions of the Study

This research study adds and enriches the knowledge base and literature on lesbian, gay and bisexual studies in a South African context, providing insight into how significant others experience the coming out process. In the research study I focussed on the various systemic influences and interactions during the process and so enriched the knowledge base focused on the systems and the interaction between them.

The narratives and experiences included in this research study are aimed at supporting families and individuals currently involved in the coming out process as they may find that experiences discussed here are similar to their own, finding a similar experience and possibly more information while moving through their own process.

As my main area of training is in the field of Educational Psychology I am aware of the application of this study in this field. I do not, however, wish to limit the application to this specific discipline being the discipline I understand and know best. The findings can be applicable in other fields such as social psychology, sociology, gender studies, lesbian and gay theory and in other interdisciplinary practical applications.

Intervention on individual and family levels forms part of the discipline of educational psychology and a thorough understanding of all individuals' perspectives is important to ensure an adequate consideration of factors involved in the coming out process. It is not only important to conceptualise the experiences of the individual but also that of the family member and to remain aware of systemic influences. This study can be found useful and applicable by practitioners and various health professionals in the process of understanding individuals and families they encounter.

6.8 Concluding Remarks

I have reached the end of my research study. I have realised throughout the study that there is still much room for investigation in this particular field and that we are by no means at the end of the research journey. I hope that the stories contained in this research study may touch the lives of individuals' coming out, or families, in a positive way and provide insight for individuals and professionals. As we learn from the stories of others, we can gain deeper understanding of the experiences that reside in others and come to a better understanding and improvement of the world we share.

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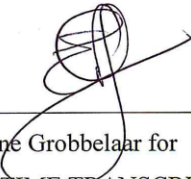
Appendix 1

Letter from transcription company

Dear Riandie Lötter,

At On Time Transcribers we work confidentially with you research data (recordings) while doing the transcription. This means that the information and recordings we receive will not be shared with anyone and that any information that could be used to identify participants will be respected and kept confidential. No data will be share with outside parties. We acknowledge that the data is not ours to distribute or share.

Dated at CAPE TOWN this 29th day of NOVEMBER 2010.11.29

_____

Elaine Grobbelaar for
ON TIME TRANSCRIBERS

Appendix 2

Record of coding the data

Before Disclosure	Systems	Act of disclosure	Systems	After disclosure	Systems
Denial (1-2; 7-9; 23-24; 70-71)	*Family Friends Society Church*	***COMING OUT FOR HER:*** In clinic (mom and dad talk to her) (350-372; 1256)	*Clinic Family Parental-child Extended family*	Aware of difficulty in society for daughter (108-113;990-992; 1290-1294)	*Society Family Extended family Friends Partners Work*
Non gender specific behaviour observed (more 'boyish') (7-9; 13-14; 16-17; 19; 32-40; 42; 207)		Acceptance (355-357) Love (370) Parental awareness (364) Left medication (375-377)		Acknowledge that they are normal people (110-121; 703) Not liking word lesbian (122-133)	
Not worried at first - not suspect gay (13-14; 204-207)		Crying; release emotions (379-381) Visit to grandmother (383-387)		Self blame and questioning (266- 275) Didn't think Allison was gay (397-401)	
Acknowledged 'differentness' (42)				Expected image of being gay (399-401; 965-968)	
Good relationship with grandmother (57-65)		***COMING OUT ABOUT COUPLE:*** Tell about relationship (406-407; 1258-1280)		Appreciate respectful behaviour (409-410) Fear of what Gran would say (432-443; 446-448)	
Family supported her (57-62)		Very blasé, shock, not polished, almost rude, immediately defiant (1258-1280)		Gran accepted (444; 453-455; 1429-1435)	
Love for Leigh (68-69; 78; 418)		Uncomfortable (406-407) Defensive (1284-1290)		All the shock for nothing (451)	
Poor mom -daughter relationship (69-70)				Extended families accept (455-467)	
Difficult to accept (70-75)		***WEDDING:*** Ignoring engagement (593-607)		Fear of extended family reactions (500-505; 512-520)	
Acknowledge that the choice is accept her or lose her (77-78; 412-420)		Got engaged (609-614)		Forced family to face issue (503-510)	
No agree with decision (78-79)		Wanted to conceal wedding plans (616-618)		Afraid of gossip (425-430)	
Acceptance (81-83; 1304-1305)		Stress about wedding (626-639)		Conceal fact from others (425-430; 560-563)	
Awareness of social judgement (84-88)				Share news with friend at work (428)	
Gay image (90-93)				Wondering about future (563-575)	
Wish for normal, happiness for daughter (101-110)				Family suspected Leigh was gay (622-624)	
Avoid terms (108; 122-133)				Accept or lose (decide to support) (640-642)	
Leigh's own struggle visible (135-159)				Want to make life easier for child (684-685; 857-858)	
Religious struggle (135-138;144-148)					
Guilt over other obligations distracting her(161-167)					
Not realise (169-177; 202)					
Shock and guilt for anger (178-191)					
Become aware (218-221; 359)					
Bad mom and daughter relationship (220-227)					
Dad also aware (234-244)					
Medication bad idea (322-332)					

Appendix 3

First attempt to organise data - highlighting too many themes

PARTICIPANT 1: Jy sê dit baie en dan dink jy…

PARTICIPANT 2: Of jy kom daar by iemand anders en daai persoon is nie daar nie of hulle is in 'n slegte bui

PARTICIPANT 1: Ja hulle het 'n bietjie traffic gehad of so iets.

PARTICIPANT 2: Ja.

PARTICIPANT 1: Ja en dit is moeilik.

RESEARCHER: En dit klink vir my dit is ook half deel van die proses want ons try nou hierdie klomp goedjies uit tot jy een aand in die kombuis staan en wag…

PARTICIPANT 2: Ja jy het nou 'n besluit gemaak en jy gaan dit nou doen.

PARTICIPANT 1: Want as jy dit nie nou doen nie gaan dit jou weer ses maande vat by daai punt te kom.

PARTICIPANT 2: Ja.

RESEARCHER: Ja.

PARTICIPANT 2: En ek het al klaar vir Karien gesê ek gaan hulle vanaand sê so ek kan nou nie…

PARTICIPANT 1: En ek wag by die foon, ek wag en wag.

RESEARCHER: Aan die ander kant van die lyn.

PARTICIPANT 2: Ja.

RESEARCHER: En het dit vir jou makliker gemaak om half mekaar se support system te hê?

PARTICIPANT 2: Ja.

PARTICIPANT 1: Ek dink as dit 'n nuwe verhouding is dan is dit moeilik. Daar is ook nie regtig 'n rede nie.

PARTICIPANT 2: As dit nie vir Karien was nie en ek het gedink ek is gay dan so ek nie sommer gesê het nie.

RESEARCHER: Ja.

PARTICIPANT 2: Ja want dan is dit pointless. Daar moet rede wees hoekom jy dit sê. Ek dink as jy in 'n verhouding is kom iets uit, ek dink nie…

PARTICIPANT 1: Ons ondersteun mekaar, jy weet. Toe sy haar ma hulle gesê het toe was sy in trane toe huil sy en toe weet ek nou sy het nou mense nodig en toe bel ek haar ander vriendinne. Dit help as daar iemand saam met jou is wat jou ken.

RESEARCHER: Ja.

PARTICIPANT 1: As jou ouers jou nou daar uitskop moet jy half a back up hê.

PARTICIPANT 2: Daar is mense wat nou nog steeds…

PARTICIPANT 1: Ja, ons ken 'n ou…

PARTICIPANT 2: Hy is twee en vyftig en sy ouers weet nie hy is gay nie.

RESEARCHER: Ja.

PARTICIPANT 2: En niemand weet hy is gay nie. Die ou is twee en vyftig, genade. Ek is bly ons is, meeste van die vriende wat ek ontmoet sê niemand hulle ouers nie.

PARTICIPANT 1: Ja, hulle het tog nie 'n baie anderste verhoudings as ons nie.

PARTICIPANT 2: Ja ek weet, maar dis iets van genade…

PARTICIPANT 1: Joe hoe moeiliker word dit.

RESEARCHER: Ja en hoe meer drome is daar wat jy dan vir ander mense moet sê….

Appendix 4

Second attempt to organise data - too broad

Coming-out to self (participant 1)
Interview 1

Systems	Self awareness		Self acceptance	Relationship
(Possible sub themes)		• Time • Age • Assert individuality	• Time • A.	
Individual	• struggle with self (26-28)(36-37) • struggle settles (38-39)(26-28) • Not major struggle (41-42) • slow awareness (41-42) • personal issues impede (99-104) • physical app. (101-104)	• fear of rejection (27-30)(66-75) • want to fit the norm (27-30) • difficult (6-7)(28-30) • time helps (37-39)(85-90) • look for support (50-53) • confidence (121-122) • assert "differentness" (170-179)	• accept (29-30) • (42-43) • overcome past issues (99-109) • age helps (99-104)(120-128) • finding independence (107-116)(101-104)(142-152)(158-159)(156-157)	
Couple	x Age difference = NB (127-161)			
Friends		• Not many lesbian friends (51-52) • People known to you in Res (52-53) • Perceptions & fathers change (54-61)(78-83)(66-75) • Notice changes in behaviour (66-78)(78-83)	• time → behaviour normalizes (85-90) • move away from "comfort zone" or "normality zone" (151-159) • Choosing friends (154-157)	
Parents		• sharing with others is difficult (35-37)		
Extended family	sharing with them = difficult (35-39)			

School	• Difficult (6-8) • Being aware (6-8)(19-20) • Not one moment (19-20) • Certainty (26-27) • Assert individuality (171-179)	• Perception that they were aware (158-168) • Feeling like outsider (170-171) • Rebellion (170-179)	• Took a while to accept (27-30)	
University	• ID "experiment" or "testing" in Potch (96-102)	• experimentation (6-10)(68-69)(first physical encounters) • friends aware (8-10) • came-out (9-12) • People in Res (52-53)	• more @ ease with self in PTA (96-102) • Impeded by dependence on others (111-116) • fear of rejection/isolation (113-116)	
Work				
Community				
Sub-culture		• Very closed world (50-52)		
Society	• See that they are aware of orientation (158-168)	• assumption that I will be attracted to all girls (58-66)(78-83) • Not want to go against grain too badly (178-171)	• Need to fit in can slow acceptance (111-116) • Independence & indiv. help (111-116)(120-122)(142-152)(156-157) • Rejection fear (113-116)	

Coming out to others (participant 1):

Interview 1

(Coming-out to self?)

Systems	Before disclosure	Act of disclosure	After disclosure	General to consider
(Possible sub themes)	* Deciding to come out? * How to decide – how to come out? * preparation ?	* How chose time? * Experience / reactions?	⊕ ⊖ neutral Time	
Individual	Assert individuality Choose friends (self awareness – self-acceptance) • image (physical) ~~do~~ (205–206) • perception of fear (205–207)			
Couple	• physical image → awareness (190–191) • fear/shock (193–194)(198–199)	• Came out with a bang (196)		
Friends		• Unexpected (196–199) • Blunt (196–199) • Mid conversation (196–199)	• Shocked and confirmed suspicion (190–194) • ~~Unsuspect~~	
Parents				

Extended family				
School				
University	• Others speculated (190–191)	• Told them @ Univ. in group (180–189)	• Individuals left (183–189) • Others talked (188–199) • Accepted their process (188–189)	
Work				
Community				
Sub-culture				
Society	Image = assume gay (190–191)			

Appendix 5

Organising data in theme/story map

Before Disclosure	Systems	Act of disclosure	Systems	After disclosure	Systems
Acknowledged 'differentness' Non gender specific behaviour observed Denial Not worried at first - not suspect gay Poor mom -daughter relationship Good relationship with grandmother Family supported her Love for Leigh Difficult to accept Acknowledge that the choice is accept her or lose her Acceptance Awareness of social judgement Wish for normal, happiness for daughter Leigh's own struggle visible Religious struggle Guilt over other obligations distracting her Shock and guilt for anger Become aware Dad also aware Depression Medication bad idea	*Family* *Friends* *Society* *Church*	***COMING OUT FOR HER:*** In clinic (mom and dad talk to her) Parental awareness Left medication Crying; release emotions Visit to grandmother ***COMING OUT ABOUT COUPLE:*** Tell about relationship Very blasé, shock, not polished, almost rude, immediately defiant Uncomfortable Defensive ***WEDDING:*** Ignoring engagement Got engaged Wanted to conceal wedding plans Stress about wedding	*Clinic* *Family* *Parental-child* *Extended family*	Aware of difficulty in society for daughter Acknowledge that they are normal people Not liking word lesbian Self blame and questioning Didn't think Allison was gay Expected image of being gay Appreciate respectful behaviour Fear of extended family reactions Forced family to face issue Fear of what Gran would say Gran accepted All the shock for nothing Extended families accept Afraid of gossip Conceal fact from others Share news with friend at work Wondering about future	*Society* *Family* *Extended family* *Friends* *Partners* *Work*

Appendix 6

How story was constructed from data sources

Interview translated from Afrikaans into English
Informal conversation
Leigh's time line

Leigh's story

Being gay - is it a single moment where everything just becomes clear? No, for me it was a growing awareness and acceptance of myself and who I am. Part of growing up and figuring out all the quirks and issues attached to my own self-confidence and self-image. My journey started when I was in Grade 10 and although I am not a talkative person, I will share my story as best I can...

In Grade 10 the realisation hit me 'I am gay'. However this was not an 'idea' that I wanted to pay particular attention to. I was not at all comfortable with the idea of being gay, that had taken hold of my mind. I also didn't want to hurt my family, and this 'idea' was something that to me seemed difficult to share with anyone without it being upsetting. At school I still felt a need to fit in or at least be accepted by the larger group of children. Being part of the norm is something I knew would be easier in the long run and I still felt somewhat unsure of myself. The 'idea' however didn't leave me and I began thinking of it more and more. As time passed the 'idea' grew into something more tangible and in Grade 11 I decided to take the next step and share the news that I had slowly been growing accustomed to, over the past year, with my best friend - that I am gay. Her reaction was nothing dramatic, nothing earth-shattering. She just told me that it was okay. I was very surprised by the fact that her behaviour towards me didn't change and she still treated me the same as she had before. I had finally shared the news that I had been carrying around alone for a whole year with someone, and I felt a great sense of relief. I told someone that I am gay and the world did not come crashing down. However although I felt relief at having shared the news with someone, I was also still trying to make this fact, the fact that *I am gay* 'okay' to myself, and at times this was not an easy task.

Wanting to fit in with the rest of high school is something every teenager wants and conforming to group standards; complying with expected norms to not be left standing out in the cold ('wearing billabong shirts like everyone else and not a PEP shirt') was expected. I was starting to feel pressure by this. The strain of fitting in with the norm interfered with my own self-acceptance and with how I perceived my 'okayness' in society. I didn't feel comfortable with all aspects of myself, as I am sure very few teenagers do, and I showed this to others, but not by talking, because as I said; 'I am not a talkative person', but through my actions and through my appearance.

Appendix 7

Condensing experiences for discussion in Chapter 5

	Before Disclosure	Act of disclosure	After disclosure
Leigh's Mom (Bronwyn)	**Denial** **Suspicion that Leigh gay** *(acknowledge 'differentness')* **Atypical gender behaviour** **Parental awareness present** *(systematic awareness and acceptance)* **Acknowledge that the choice was accept her or lose her** **Poor mother - daughter relationship** **Wish communicated about issue** **Family supported throughout** **Awareness of 'gay' image** **Pastor failed them** *(looked for support)* **Lonely journey**	**Realising need to verbalise awareness** **Acceptance** **Difficult** *(to accept)* **Love** **How came out difficult to accept** *(Not polished, almost rude, immediately, defensive - shocked by this)* **Ignored** *engagement at first* **Wanted to conceal** *(wedding plans at first)* **Forced family to face issue** **Supported wedding**	**Perceived judgement in society** *(towards daughter)* **Wish to conceal** **Sharing news lead to relief** **Not liking word lesbian and avoid terms** **Search for answers** **Guilt** *(for not standing up for daughter when friends gossip)* **Self-blame and questioning** **Feelings of failure** **Fear of extended family reactions** **Brought extended family closer** **Unsure about future life for daughter** *(concern)* **Normalisation makes acceptance easier** *(influences from media, peers and siblings)* **Love and thankful for Allison** *(daughter's partner)* **Acknowledge positives seen from relationship**

	All participants	All parents	Both mothers	Leigh's parents
Commonalities in experience	• Suspicion • Positive impacts observed	• Acceptance process is difficult	• Guilt/Self-blame • Shame • Questioning parenting practices • Denial • Search for answers • Wish for concealment • Fear of extended family reactions • Perceived judgement in society • Perception of gay image	• Strengthened family relationships • Method of coming out difficult to accept • Acceptance and love expressed and experienced, supported wedding • Parental awareness of sexual orientation