

# **Discursive Struggles Animating Individuals' Talk About Their Parents' Coming Out as Lesbian or Gay**

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## **Abstract**

The goal in the present study was to understand the discourses that animate children's talk about having a parent come out and how these discourses interplay to create meaning. Data were gathered through 20 in-depth interviews with adults who remembered a parent coming out to them as lesbian or gay. One discursive struggle animated the participants' talk about their parents' coming out: the discourse of lesbian and gay identity as wrong vs. the discourse of lesbian and gay identity as acceptable. Analysis of participants' talk about their familial identities revealed a range of avenues for resisting the negative discourses regarding lesbian and gay identities. The findings highlight discursive power in participants' talk about their familial identities and how participants organize the conflicting messages they receive in their culture and in relationships regarding family identities.

The same-sex parented family is a family form that is increasingly visible in U.S. American culture and in scholarship (Black, Gates, Sanders, & Taylor, 2000). Despite the growing presence of lesbian and gay families in recent years, these families continue to face societal pressure and challenges to family identity that traditional families do not (Bergen, Suter, & Daas, 2006; Breshears, 2010; Johnson & O'Connor, 2002; Murray & McClintock, 2005; Negy & McKinney, 2006; Patterson, 2000; Suter, Daas, & Bergen, 2008). Same-sex parented families face a lack of social acceptance, risk being shunned by family, neighbors, and friends, and may even experience job loss or housing discrimination (Van Voorhis & McClain, 1997). In response to stigmatization, researchers have dedicated the majority of lesbian and gay family research to exploring the sexual identity, social functioning, and psychological well-being of children in these "non-traditional" family forms (reviewed in Goldberg, 2010; Tasker & Patterson, 2007). Time and time again, research shows that children of lesbian and gay parents develop normally

and do not significantly differ from children in heterosexual families in these three areas (Goldberg, 2010).

Despite the overwhelming evidence of well-being in children with lesbian and gay parents, cultural discourses regarding same-sex parenting remain conflicted and stigmatization endures (Goldberg, 2010). Peplau and Beals (2004) reported on a Kaiser Foundation survey conducted in 2001 that showed that the U.S. public is evenly divided in its views about the morality of lesbian and gay identity and same-sex parenting. Much of this opposition is fueled by the belief that diverse family forms, including lesbian and gay families, are threatening the traditional notion of family (O'Donnell, 1999). In a public opinion survey, Herek (2002) found that Communists and Atheists were the only groups identified as more harmful than lesbians and gay men. Conservative activists and opponents of same-sex parenting often claim ill effects of such parenting on children as justification for the denial of rights to same-sex couples, such as the right to marry, insurance benefits, and the right to adopt children (Birch, 2002; Goldberg, 2010). Though these claims have been refuted in current research, cultural discourses regarding the detriment of same-sex parenting on children persist.

With the circulation of anti-gay cultural discourses, children of lesbian and gay parents are likely to be exposed to negative messages in their everyday lives, requiring them to redefine their family in their interactions with outsiders (Dalton & Bielby, 2000; Telingator & Patterson, 2008). These anti-gay discourses in U.S. American culture may serve to give children a sense of shame about their family identity, and may lead them to hide their family identity (Murray & McClintock, 2005; Perlesz et al., 2006). Hiding familial identity, however, may bring consequences of stress and isolation for children with lesbian and gay parents (Goldberg, 2010). Feelings of shame and secrecy arise from the tension children often feel between their unique

families and mainstream discourses of what family should be (Perlesz et al., 2006).

In addition to cultural discourses about their familial identities, discourses also emerge from relationships between same-sex parented and extended family members and peers. These families often experience conflicting messages of rejection and support from extended family members (Almack, 2007; Breshears, 2010; Breshears, 2011; Goldberg, 2007). More than half of adult children with lesbian parents in Kivalanka's (2007) study reported experiencing homophobia within their extended families. Further, most participants also reported homophobic experiences in their interactions with peers, including negative or homophobic comments and instances of harassment or teasing about their familial identities. For many children, school may be the first context in which they experience messages about families that contradict their understanding of their family form and it is in this arena that they experience conflicting messages that serve to support or challenge the validity and normalcy of their familial identities (Fedewa & Clark, 2009; Gianino, Goldberg, & Lewis, 2009; Goldberg, 2007; Ray & Gregory, 2001).

It is clear that children of lesbian and gay parents co-create and are exposed to a variety of cultural and relational discourses regarding their familial identities. Communication scholars have begun to examine the ways in which lesbian parented families communicate and negotiate their familial identities through ritual and symbol use in the midst of stigmatization (Bergen, Suter, & Daas, 2006; Breshears, 2010; Breshears, 2011; Suter, Daas, & Bergen, 2008). One issue that remains understudied in lesbian and gay family research is the degree to which the conflicting discourses are present and interplay in children's communicative construction of familial identities. In the current study we began this exploration by examining one type of family experience, that of adults' reflections on their mother's or father's coming out processes.

We were particularly interested in exploring the discourses from the perspectives of the children, as researchers studying lesbian and gay parenting often focus on the parents' perspectives during the coming out process rather than those of the children in these families (Goldberg, 2007; 2010). Further, exploring discourses in children's current talk about their familial identities will provide important insights into the lasting impact of cultural and relational discourse on children's understanding and construction of their familial identities over time.

### **Theoretical Rationale: Relational Dialectics Theory**

As stigmatized families may experience unusual conflict between their family structures and cultural ideas of family identity (Perlesz et al., 2006), the new iteration of Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) was an ideal guide for the current study (Baxter, 2011). After the initial introduction of RDT (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), researchers devoted much time and effort to locating contradiction in various relationship types and contexts, such as public/private, autonomy/connectedness, and predictability/spontaneity (e.g., Baxter, 1990; Baxter & Braithwaite, 2002; Penington, 2004). Though this work was informative, Baxter (2011) argued that these scholars stopped short of the main focus of RDT, which is the *interplay* of these tensions (Baxter, 2004). Researchers focused on pairs of dialectical tensions and contradictions at the expense of understanding the interplay of discourses and how this interplay creates meaning in relationships (Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010). The term "discursive struggle" is more appropriate than "contradiction" in the new generation of RDT (which Baxter has termed "RDT 2.0"), as the focus is on conflicting discourses rather than psychological tensions or contradictions (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010). Baxter (2011) defined discourse as a point of view, worldview, or ideology constituted in communication. She explained, "RDT narrows the domain of intertextuality from a more benign focus on differing discourses in textual

play to the more combative focus on competing or opposing discourses that interpenetrate” (Baxter, 2010, p. 371). Thus, the greatest shift from the original articulation of the theory concerns the struggle (i.e., interplay) of competing ideologies in people’s talk (Baxter, 2011).

**The utterance chain.** There are two critical concepts in RDT 2.0: the *utterance chain* and *centripetal-centrifugal struggle* (Baxter, 2011). An utterance is not an isolated event, but a link in a chain of utterances that includes already voiced discourses and anticipated discourses (Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010). There are four forms of utterances in the utterance chain (Baxter, 2011). The first type of utterance link is the *Distal already-spoken*, which is a discourse circulating in the culture at large. The second type of utterance link is the *Proximal already-spoken*, which is the past meanings constituted in a relationship that are brought into the meaning of the relationship in the present. Thus, individuals bring the relationship history and previous interactions to the table when interacting in the present. The third type of utterance link is the *Proximal not-yet-spoken*, which is the immediate anticipation of the response that will be received by the relational other. It is in this discursive site that relational partners construct meaning through the interaction and anticipation of the similarities and differences in their meaning systems. The final type of utterance link is the *Distal not-yet-spoken*, which is the anticipation of how a generalized other or third party will respond. Individuals base these anticipated reactions on the normative ideals of the culture. These four types of discourses interact with one another to create meaning in relationships (Baxter, 2011). Baxter referred to this process of interplay as the Centripetal-Centrifugal struggle.

**Centripetal-centrifugal struggle.** The greatest shift between the two articulations of RDT is the central focus Baxter (2011) has given to the centripetal-centrifugal struggle in RDT 2.0. At any given moment, one discourse is dominant over more marginalized discourses. Thus,

according to Baxter (2011), the discourses mentioned above are constantly in a power struggle to be the only accepted discourse, or to be viewed as the most acceptable discourse. When a discourse is given more weight, it takes the centripetal position. That is, it is legitimized and conceptualized as normal, typical, or natural. When a discourse is given less power, it takes the centrifugal position. That is, it gets pushed to the margins and is considered as non-normative, unnatural, or deviant (Baxter, 2011). Baxter (2010) argued, “the interests of social groups or individuals are differentially served dependent on which discourses are centered, but such power derives from dominant discourses” (p. 372). It is then through the interplay (i.e., power struggle) of various discourses that meaning is made. In addition to looking at power struggles between discourses, RDT 2.0 has more of a critical focus through the contextualizing of events, relationships, and identities within relational and societal cultures (Baxter, 2011). This critical turn of RDT makes this theory ideal as the guiding lens for examining the competing discourses animating children’s experiences of having lesbian and gay parents and the construction of their familial identities.

Though Baxter’s (2011) emphasis was on the analysis of *current* competing discourses that call into play past and anticipated discourses (that is, discourses that conflict in the participants talk during the interview), we were examining a *process* that began in the past. Thus, we focused on discourses that were competing over a period of time, rather than at a single moment in time. These past discourses were still at play in the participants’ current talk as they discursively constructed their familial identities in the interviews, though they were not conflicting to the same extent as they were in the past. Therefore, as much of our focus was on discourses at play over time, we use the term “discourse chain” in place of Baxter’s (2011) term “utterance chain” for the remainder of the research report. To explore this process, we posed the

following research questions:

RQ1: What competing discourses regarding lesbian and gay identities animate participants' talk about their experiences of having a parent come out to them?

RQ2: How do the competing discourses interplay in participants' current talk about their familial identities?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants in the study were 20 adult volunteers whose ages ranged from 22-40 years ( $M_{age} = 29$ ). Six participants identified as male, while 14 participant identified as female. All but one participant identified as White/Caucasian, with one participant identifying as Black/Panamanian. The participants' ages at the time of their parents' coming out ranged from 5-32 years ( $M_{age} = 17$ ). To take part in our study, participants had to meet two criteria. First, participants were adults, which is defined by the IRB at our institution as 19 years or older. Second, participants recalled and were able to discuss the time when they perceived their parents to be heterosexual, and remembered having a conversation with their lesbian or gay parents about the parents' sexual identities. We chose to interview children who had a change in understanding of their parents' sexual identities because it is at the site of change or rupture in relationships that RDT is best applied (Baxter, 2011).

Participants were recruited through a combination of network and snowball sampling. We began with network sampling, which is the process of disseminating the call for participants through the researcher's social and professional networks (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Creswell, 2007). We also engaged in snowball sampling, which is the process of asking current participants to suggest other possible participants for the study (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Creswell, 2007). In

accordance with our university's IRB policy to protect the confidentiality of these individuals, we did not ask participants to provide the names of potential participants, but rather to provide our contact information to potential participants so that they could contact us if they were interested in taking part in the study.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured, open-ended interviews. The use of open-ended questions allowed the participants to provide thick description of their experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Further, LaSala (2005) claimed that the use of qualitative methods, such as interviews, can help researchers describe the largely uncharted, complex lives and experiences of lesbian and gay persons. Most of the participants in the current study took part in interviews over the telephone and one participated via webcam, as the participants were in varied geographic locations due to the challenges of locating informants. Interviews lasted 40-80 minutes. Interview questions were designed to elicit information about the discourses at play concerning the participants' familial identity before, during, and after their parents' coming out, as well as the ways in which they organize these discourses in their current talk. A selection of these questions included: What did you know and think about homosexuality prior to and after learning about your parent's sexual orientation?; Tell me the story of finding out that your parent is lesbian/gay; What messages were there about your family identity in your conversations with people both within and outside your family?; and What are your thoughts about the various messages you've encountered about your family identity?

The first author collected and transcribed the interview data, and began initial analyses to gain a preliminary sense of the emerging themes. She continued to interview participants until we reached theoretical saturation with the 15<sup>th</sup> interview. Saturation is reached when researchers

find redundancy in the emerging patterns and themes of the data, and therefore, no longer find new categories pertinent to phenomena or research questions at hand (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Once we reached theoretical saturation in the data, the first author conducted five additional interviews to ensure that we did not prematurely end data collection.

### **Data Analysis**

Baxter (2011) developed a methodological practice to engage with RDT called Contrapuntal Analysis, through which researchers identify and explore the interplay of competing discourses in the data. Researchers can identify instances of competition in three ways: through identifying the use of linguistic markers (such as “but” and “however”) in participants’ talk, by verifying with the participants that the discourses are competing, and by demonstrating that the competition of discourses is generally known in the larger culture (Baxter, 2011; Baxter, Scharp, Asbury, Jannusch, & Norwood, 2012). As we were not examining competition in a single moment in time, but rather discourses competing over a period of time, we relied on the second and third method of interplay identification. Researchers using contrapuntal analysis rely heavily on qualitative analysis techniques (thematic analysis), and Baxter (2011) suggested approaching the analysis with the starting place of inductive methods used in interpretive studies. Thus, we used an analytic induction method to analyze the data once they were transcribed. With this emergent process, themes and categories surface through comparing and contrasting of the data during examination (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). In the present study, themes for RQ1 were the discourses or ideologies present in participants’ talk about their experiences surrounding their parents’ coming out. Subsequently, themes for RQ2 were the interplay and positioning of the discourses in the participants’ current talk about their familial identities.

To identify themes and categories, we used Smith's (1995) five-step guideline for thematic analysis. First, the first author read through the transcripts completely to familiarize herself with the data. Second, she read through each transcript again, noting in one margin anything that "[struck her] as interesting or significant about what the respondent [was] saying" (p. 19). In the other margin, she documented emerging themes that spoke to the research questions. Third, she listed all of the emerging themes and looked for connections among them. As clusters of themes emerged, she continually checked back with the transcripts to ensure that the connections also worked with the source. Fourth, she produced a master list of themes for each research question, which both authors discussed and arrived at consensus. Last, the first author added an "identifier of instances" to the master list, indicating where in the transcripts each occurrence of the theme could be found (p. 20). Once the five steps were complete, both authors met and extensively discussed the emergent themes, scrutinizing and ultimately reaching consensus on the resulting themes.

To enhance the validity of our findings, we tested our analysis in an extensive collaborative data conference with four researchers trained in interpretive methodology and RDT. In the data conference the scholars worked together to check and refine our analyses and categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Following the data conference, the first author engaged in member checking with five participants (representing one-fourth of our participants) to ensure that our interpretations of the data were representative of the participants' experiences. Member checking occurs when researchers take their conclusions back to the participants to receive feedback (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This gives the participants the chance to catch any misunderstandings or errors in conclusions made by the researchers. The participants in our study overwhelmingly responded positively to our findings, confirming that they were

representative of their experiences.

## **Results**

### **Discourses Animating The Children's Talk About Their Parents' Coming Out**

Our goal for addressing RQ1 was to understand the discourses that animated participants' talk about their experiences of having a parent come out to them. For a more complete understanding, we included the discourses at play in the time preceding the coming out conversations. Thus, participants were asked to discuss their understanding of lesbian and gay identities prior to learning their parents' sexual identities and subsequently to discuss the messages animating their experiences after their parents came out.

One main discursive struggle emerged from the participants' discussion of their experiences both prior to and following their parents' coming out: lesbian and gay identities as wrong versus lesbian and gay identities as acceptable. To follow, we discuss each of these larger discourses and the various forms these discourses took throughout the coming out process. Though we discuss these discourses separately, it is important to note that these discourses do not occur in isolation from one another. At any given moment, discourses at various points of the discourse chain are in interplay (Baxter, 2011). For the participants, each of these discourses, or systems of meaning, were in constant competition to be the accepted, centered discourse throughout their experiences of their parents' coming out.

#### **Lesbian and Gay Identity as Wrong**

The discourse of lesbian and gay identity as wrong (hereafter referred to as the "negative discourse") was the only discourse that occurred at each point of the discourse chain (distal-already-spoken, proximal-already-spoken, proximal-not-yet-spoken, distal-not-yet-spoken). That is, this discourse emerged in the form of both cultural and relational messages, and was

constituted in both enacted and anticipated communication. Here, we briefly establish the presence of this discourse in participants' talk about their experiences of having a lesbian or gay parent, demonstrating how discourses emerge and interplay on various levels of the discourse chain.

Shelby, a 30-year-old woman whose mother came out to her when she was 5-years-old, discussed the event that led to her understanding that same-sex relationships are condemned by some people. She shared the story of this realization:

And you know, honestly, I didn't know it was bad in the eyes of society until third grade, which my mom had been out to me for quite a while.... So there was a lot of resentment there on the part of my father. My mom was throwing a birthday party for me for my eighth birthday... and my dad found out about it and found out all the girls that were coming, and called all of their parents and informed them that my mother was a lesbian and a child abuser. And all but one girl didn't come.... That's when I realized, for the first time, that what my mom was, was not considered normal or right. After that, it kind of changed everything, quite honestly. [9:60-75; this notation denotes interview and line numbers from the interview transcripts; pseudonyms are used throughout this report]

Shelby elaborated on the importance of the events that transpired at the birthday party:

Well, you know, I had seen my mom kiss and hold hands and hug her partner through the years and when that whole thing [the party] came down, then I realized, "Oh my god, this is something people think is bad. There's something wrong with my mom." It was never really a thought of, "My mom has sex with women." It was never really anything like that. It was just that what she did was wrong, whatever it was that she was doing. [9:191-195]

In this narrative, the negative discourse emerges at the distal-already-spoken level of the discourse chain (i.e., an established cultural discourse), as well as at the proximal-already-spoken level (i.e., an established relational discourse). In the telling of this story, Shelby referenced both the cultural disapproval of her mother's identity as well as the disapproval expressed by her father and friends.

The negative discourse also emerged in various forms while Devon, a 29-year-old man who learned that his father is gay when he was eight years old, discussed having a gay father. He

shared:

When you start talking about it at school... you learn real quickly that it's not really something that was really expressed or accepted openly at school... People started, you know, to use the word "fag" or "homo" or, you know, your typical slang words. I mean, back when all the, you know, jokes would start to come out and, you know, "fag this," "gay this, gay that," and that's when you start to realize, "Okay, I actually can't tell this person." You know, I was very hesitant at first to tell people at school, some of my friends, because I didn't – I believe my dad kind of warned us about it. You know, it's not something that you want to run around bragging about. You know, there's repercussions that'll come from it. [16:102-116]

Devon's talk about his experiences reveals the negative discourse at all levels of the discourse chain. First, he expressed an understanding of cultural discourses (distal-already-spoken) against same-sex relationships. Second, he revealed his understanding of the cultural disapproval of lesbian and gay identities as emerging from conversations he had with his father (proximal-already-spoken discourse). Finally, Devon revealed anticipated rejection from his friends if he were to tell them that he had a gay father (proximal-not-yet-spoken discourse) as well as rejection from classmates in general if they were to find out (distal-not-yet-spoken discourse).

### **Lesbian and Gay Identity as Acceptable**

Throughout their experiences of their parents' coming out, participants were aware of another primary discourse, which contrasted with the negative discourse: the view of lesbian and gay identities as acceptable (hereafter referred to as the "positive discourse"). Though discourses condemning lesbian and gay identities occurred at every point on the discourse chain, the positive discourse only occurred in the distal-already-spoken and the proximal-already-spoken points of the discourse chain. Julia, a 39-year-old woman who discovered her mother's sexual identity seven years ago, discussed a shift toward cultural acceptance of lesbians and gay men:

Um, I think it was tougher then than it is now, and that's even in the past 20 years. You know...I have a lot of Catholic gay friends, just from going to Catholic schools. And I think they had a difficult time [back then] because those conflicting, you know, "Do I do what my church says or do what my body says?" And so I think it was really hard for a

lot of my friends to accept who they were. And I think more and more now, it's okay.  
[6:90-94]

Reflecting on her friends' past experiences, Julia concluded that people coming out in recent years experience more societal acceptance than people received in the past. Derek, a 24-year-old man whose father came out to him when he was 16 years old, also expressed a climate of increased societal acceptance of lesbians and gay men. After recalling a period of time when he kept his father's sexual identity a secret, he concluded that he would not be as hesitant to share that information today. He explained, "If it were brought up in discussion, I wouldn't have any problem now. I think society has gotten to the point where it's more open than ten years ago, and I think it's widely more accepted" [4:241-243].

It is important to note that, reflected in the participants' discourse, the shared understanding of culture *becoming* more supportive does not translate directly into society *is* supportive, and thus does not explicitly support the positive discourse. Nonetheless, participants expressed the belief that societal views will continue to shift, and hope that someday the distal-already-spoken discourse will reflect acceptance of lesbians and gay men.

Though participants acknowledged the growing cultural acceptance of lesbians and gay men, the positive discourse overwhelmingly occurred at the proximal-already-spoken point of the discourse chain, both before and after their parents came out. These discourses were enacted in the various messages of support expressed within the participants' relationships with family members and friends. Thomas, a 29-year-old man whose father came out to him when he was 19 years old, discussed the support that his family has shown toward his father who is in a relationship with another man. He explained:

I think that the positive messages that I've received from my family members have been more ... implied rather than explicit. The degree to which, you know, Mark has become a part of the family in my dad's side of the family is a pretty strong positive example....It

isn't like they've gone to a gay pride parade, but the acceptance of my dad and Mark into the family as they reestablished normalcy on my dad's side of the family is probably the strongest example of acceptance. [15:410-422]

The subtle support the family expressed to his father and his father's partner contributed to the discourses at play during Thomas's discussion of his father's coming out. Bethany, a 26-year-old woman whose mother came out to her when she was 16 years old, discussed the positive reactions she received from her friends when she told them her mother is a lesbian. She shared:

My friends were very supportive...everyone was really great. I guess I was really worried because my mom is just a tiny, cute little person, and the world can crush her, and she's had such a hard time. So I was just worried that people would take advantage and say terrible things and hurt her more. It really, as far as I know, didn't turn out that way. She put positive things out there and they came back. Yeah, my friends really surprised me; they were very, very great. [8:369-375]

Overall, positive messages from family and friends gave the participants a sense of lesbian and gay identities as acceptable and worthy of support. Having briefly discussed the primary discursive struggle present throughout the participants' discussion of their parents' coming out, to follow we discuss the interplay of the discourses in participants' talk of these experiences.

### **Interplay of Discourses in Participants' Talk About Their Familial Identities**

Our goal for answering research question two was to understand how the competing discourses regarding lesbian and gay identities interplay in participants' talk about their experiences of having a parent come out to them. It was clear in the participants' retrospective accounts that there was a discursive struggle between discourses condemning and supporting lesbian and gay identities throughout the coming out process. Though we were unable to witness participants' moments of struggle with the competing discourses that were present in the past, we were able to gain an understanding of how the competing discourses are currently positioned in their talk as they constructed their familial identities in the interviews.

### **Centripetal/Centrifugal Positioning of Discourses**

Though all participants in the study reported both negative and supportive discourses at play throughout their coming out experiences with their parents, all participants have given the positive discourse the centripetal position in their talk, and the negative discourse the centrifugal position. This positioning of discourses was embodied in the participants' talk in three types of interplay: (a) polemical interplay, (b) hidden polemical interplay, and (c) direct interplay.

**Polemical interplay.** The most common interplay between the two competing ideologies was present in the participants' talk as polemical interplay, which occurs when one discourse is centered in the participants' talk while others are marginalized (Baxter, 2011). Overwhelmingly, participants marginalized the negative discourse, favoring the positive discourse. This positioning of discourses was accomplished in four ways: (a) emphasizing opposing views as ignorant, (b) highlighting the flaws of religious views, (c) stressing others' lack of authority to judge, and (d) emphasizing the precedence of love.

***Emphasizing opposing views as ignorant.*** Many participants associated the negative discourse with people's lack of knowledge. Gloria, a 27-year-old woman whose father came out to her when she was 22 years old, expressed, "Being pretty confident in what I believe, I kind of just disregard people; I kind of think people are just stupid [laughing]." [2:422-423]. Gloria simply dismissed opposing views that she deemed ignorant. Gabrielle, a 40-year-old woman whose mother came out to her when she was 25 years old, also downplayed negative discourses by identifying the root of these discourses as a lack of knowledge. She explained:

But I try not to get angry, and recognize that people are often blinded by their own passion. So, if someone's really, really passionate about their own faith or their own belief system that they find comfort in really being very specific about what the Bible says and not being willing to look beyond that, just keeping their blinders on, I don't want to say "ignorant" because it sounds so judgmental and harsh but it's a certain level of just not being willing to find out more. [17:289-295]

Overall, participants represented in this category attribute people's negative discourse to their lack of knowledge about, and/or inexperience with lesbian and gay individuals.

***Highlighting flaws of religious views.*** The second way the negative discourse was marginalized in the participants' talk was by discussing their perceptions of the flawed religious ideology on which it is founded. This strategy was used by Lydia, a 22-year-old woman whose mother came out to her when she was eight years old, in her discussion of negative religious discourse:

Well, I looked at a lot of the different scriptures on it and ...there's about six scriptures in the Bible that deal with homosexuality and there's about six hundred that deal with economics, money, poverty – it's just – it's clearly not very important to the overall Christian message and like, what the overall Christ-like life is. It's such this tiny, tiny unimportant thing that's taken a really disproportionate importance in church politics, I think. So, there's a few scriptures. That's all we have to go on. [19:395-402]

Gabrielle also highlighted her belief about the flaws of religious discourses against lesbian and gay identities in her discussion of her mother's coming out process. She explained:

So, I became a supporter of my mother and ultimately an activist for the GLBT community because I was able to back up— I felt good within myself knowing that I had done all this research and found all of these conflicts in the Christian argument and a lot of other fundamentalists' religions' arguments. [17:122-125]

By highlighting the lack of scriptural support and the conflicting arguments within the religious discourses Gabrielle and others represented in this category marginalized the negative discourse.

***Stressing others' lack of authority to judge.*** The third way participants marginalized the negative discourse in their talk was by disregarding messages of condemnation on the grounds that people do not have the right to judge others. Derek expressed this view when he said:

I think that it's important to know that it's not a way of life that should be determined by society. It should be determined by the people involved, mainly, the family, and how they want to view their situation. I think that there would be a lot more openness if society would play less of a role in determining how people should live their lives. People should be free to live with whatever sexual orientation they want. [4:270-274]

According to Derek and other participants, cultural discourses against lesbians and gay men infringe upon the freedom of individuals to be themselves. Louise, a 29-year-old woman who learned that her mother was gay at age 13, echoed the opinion that people do not have the right to condemn others when she expressed:

Well, I pretty much feel like people should be able to do whatever they want to do as long as they're not hurting anybody else. So I kind of think that everybody else should sort of go fuck themselves.... I don't understand why anybody else cares either, you know. I don't understand why there's so much of a push to demonize people whose business really doesn't affect you at all just because you don't like what they're up to. [12:424-432]

Louise had some strong words for people who condemn lesbians and gay men because she adamantly believes that it is not their place to judge people like her mother. By highlighting their perception of others' lack of authority to judge, participants represented in this category invalidated the negative cultural discourses regarding their parents' sexual identities.

*Emphasizing precedence of love.* The fourth way participants marginalized the negative discourse in their talk was by emphasizing the precedence of relational love. That is, participants claimed that, above all else, love should be valued and supported in any form it takes. Shelby centered the importance of love in her discussion of her mother's coming out when she stressed:

Well, I think that you should be willing to accept love in whatever form it comes in, and if it's same sex or opposite sex, then whatever makes you happy is ultimately the most important thing. If it's in the form of a woman and you happen to be a woman, then I hope that it's the happiness that you're looking for. And the same goes for guys. Truly, I think that you should be able to be open to love in whatever form it comes in. [9:225-229]

Similarly, while discussing the religious discourses, Lydia downplayed the arguments against lesbian and gay identities, focusing instead on the primacy of love. She explained:

It's not important to my Christian faith to know what God's actual stance is. It's the biggest things that I know are important about love and commitment. Mom and Claire model that for me and so, even though they aren't Christian, I learn a lot about what it

means to have a Christian relationship from watching them. [19:403-407]

Overall, participants in this category downplayed the negative discourse in their talk, and instead focused on the greater importance of love in same-sex relationships. By presenting the discourses in this way, participants gave the positive discourse the centripetal position in their talk.

**Hidden polemical interplay: Sexuality as innate.** Though the competing discourses regarding sexual identity were most frequently interacting as a polemical interplay in participants' talk, wherein one discourse is centered in the participants' talk while others are marginalized, there was one category of hidden polemical interplay, which occurs when a discourse is marginalized or refuted without directly being referenced in the participants' talk (Baxter, 2011). Participants' talk embodied a hidden polemical interplay in their discussion of sexuality as innate rather than sexuality as a choice. Some participants argued that people are born with their sexual identities and thus are not able to change who they are. Though sexuality as a choice was not *directly* identified or discussed by participants as a discourse at play throughout their parents' coming out processes, their discussion of sexuality as innate refutes the argument that people choose to be lesbian or gay. Gabrielle emphasized the innate nature of sexuality when she argued:

My opinion of homosexuality is that it is not a choice. It is something that people are born with. To me it's not this weird, other group of people living in the world... that we are all the same, and that we all need to have the same rights and recognition as human beings, and as intact couples, and as parents. [17:218-221]

Similarly, Bette, a 22-year-old woman whose mother came out to her when she was eight years old, expressed her view of sexuality as innate when she discussed her transition from thinking lesbian and gay identities were sinful to seeing them as acceptable. She explained, "But as I grew older, I learned that we do things on a daily basis that we can't explain, that we can't change, and we sometimes have no control of, that people judge us for" [10:231-233]. Overall, participants

represented in this category indirectly reject the discourse of sexuality as a choice in their emphases on the natural, innate nature of all sexual identities.

**Direct interplay.** The final type of interplay of the competing discourses regarding lesbian and gay identities occurred in the participants' talk as direct interplay. Direct interplay occurs when participants allow multiple discourses to be given voice simultaneously (Baxter, 2011). Though all participants centered the positive discourse in their talk, some participants gave voice to, and validated opposing discourse. Through our analysis of data we identified two such instances: (a) in their consideration of other views, and (b) in the value they place on the rights of others to have opposing opinions.

*Consideration of other views.* First, many participants reported their own attempts to understand other people's views, even when they are in opposition to their own, if they perceived these discourses as genuine and non-hateful. James, a 30-year-old man whose father came out to him six years ago, shared a story in which his mother labeled all people in opposition to lesbians and gay men as hateful. He explained that her judgment was unfair because some people's concerns about these identities, and specifically about his father's coming out, are motivated by concern rather than hate, and thus should be given voice. He explained:

I deplore somebody who comes along and is attacking or vicious or mean. It's really frustrating. But then there are people who are very genuine and have concerns, and they feel like that and they want to approach him, almost like you'd confront someone who was part of your life. And I didn't like that being labeled as hate speech or as intolerance. I had a conversation with my mom and she'd posted something on her blog where she said, "If you have any of these opinions, you're a hateful person and not cool." And I was like, "Mom! You're killing me here. I don't—like, I love Dad, and I want him to be healthy in whatever relationship he's in. I don't want to attack or tear down or destroy anything. But when I see something like this, it's not hate. That's genuine." [1:387-395]

James claimed that, though hateful discourse should not be given voice and though he may think people with opposing views are homophobic or wrong, if opposition were motivated by genuine

concern for the lesbian or gay individual or by a desire to understand, he was willing to give space for that discourse. Darlene, a 23-year-old woman who discovered that her father is gay when she was 13 years old, similarly explained how she gave space for opposing discourse in order to understand people's views and why they espouse them. She explained:

And I think now, going into grad school, and hearing some different comments, and being in a much more traditional, conservative area, I hear homophobic comments a lot more often than I did, and I'm much more aware of it, and in a better place of learning to kind of dissect the comment and try to meet the person where they're coming from—like, try to at least understand where they're coming from, and confront them that way.  
[13:406-410]

By giving people the opportunity to voice their opposition, Darlene hoped for a better understanding of their views, and, when possible, an opportunity to engage in a constructive conversation with these individuals.

*Value the right of others' opinions.* Second, some participants gave voice to multiple, often competing, discourses by validating people's rights to their own opinions. Participants represented in this category claimed that, though they may not like what others believe and say about lesbians and gay men, these people have a right to voice their opposition. Bette expressed the importance of allowing people to express their various opinions about sexuality, even if they were in opposition to her own. She explained:

My mom told me that sometimes—she's been telling me this like forever.... Sometimes you have to let people be where they are so you can get where you're going. And I hold that as true to, not only this, but everything else in my life. People are gonna have opposition.... So I look at them like, everybody has their own opinions and I'm respectful of other people's opinions, because at the end of the day, you can't go around and challenge fights with everybody. I'm not going to lie, it's still hurtful sometimes when I hear these things, but at the same time, everybody's entitled to their opinions and how they feel. Who am I to take that away?... But, at the end of the day, at least I've conveyed my message and you've conveyed yours. I can only hope that you've taken something positive away from what I've shared with you. [10:317-331]

Bette and other participants represented in this category saw value in other opinions and the right

to express these opinions, even if they were opposing, and thus gave voice to multiple discourses in their talk about their experiences of their parents' coming out. Though they do not adopt the negative discourse as their own, they do not want to silence others who espoused the discourse.

### **Discussion**

Extant literature has been dedicated to understanding the effects of lesbian and gay parenting on children's well-being and functioning (Bos, van Balen, & van den Boom, 2005; Lambert, 2005; Tasker & Patterson, 2007) and we add to this knowledge by shedding light on the discourses that animate the children's experiences of their parents' coming out processes, as well as the ways in which they position these discourses in the construction of their familial identities. To follow, we offer conclusions and implications for the central findings of our study.

#### **Discourses at Play**

Though most participants, at the time of the interview, completely embraced the discourses in support of their familial identities and marginalized those in opposition, both types of discourses were present in the participants' current talk about having lesbian and gay parents. As the interplay of positive and negative discourses continues in distal and proximal spaces, they continue to have salience in the lives of children of lesbian and gay parents long after they have come to terms with their parents' sexual identities. Though children may view their family form in positive terms, and even have pride in their family, they continually have to negotiate the heteronormative discourses present in U.S. culture in their discursive constructions of family identity (Litovich & Langhout, 2004).

That the negative discourse permeated every point of the discourse chain is important to highlight. Participants were both inundated with negative discourses about their familial identities and also expected to experience future opposition in their relationships and social

interactions. Subsequently, the positive discourse occurred overwhelmingly at the proximal-already-spoken point of the discourse chain in the form of supportive messages from friends and family. It is important to note that though negative discourses occurred at all points in the discourse chain, discourses of support existed at the relational level, further suggesting that children of lesbian and gay parents rarely experienced cultural discourses that validated and affirmed their family identities. Taken together, these findings highlight the need for cultural discourses that affirm the familial identities of lesbian and gay parents and their children. Social messages of lesbian and gay identities as wrong or unhealthy may cause families to experience negative identity formation or the need to remain closeted (Litovich & Langhout, 2004; Lynch, 2000; Murray & McClintock, 2005). Until there are cultural discourses affirming same-sex parented families, these families will continue to be at risk for the negative impact stigmatization may have on their familial identity.

### **Interplay/Positioning of Discourses**

It is noteworthy that participants reported both negative and positive discourses at play during their experiences of their parents' coming out, but subsequently have all given the positive discourse the centripetal position in their talk, and the negative discourse the centrifugal position. This is an important finding as negative discourses permeated their experiences of their parents' coming out. Participants' positioning of the discourses suggests that relational discourses (which were largely supportive) are more salient than cultural discourses (which were largely non-supportive). This finding is consistent with the claim by Lay et al. (1998) that "family is generally the most salient ingroup category in the lives of individuals" (p. 435). Through the findings in the current study we extend our understanding of familial identity salience by emphasizing its salience in sites of conflict between cultural and relational messages.

When faced with competing discourses about sexual identity, family identity was most salient as participants explored what it meant to have lesbian and gay parents.

The findings in our study show how children of lesbian and gay parents strategically construct favorable identities in their talk. Though the participants were inundated with negative discourses throughout their parents' coming out processes, all participants reported a positive sense of familial identity and positive relationships with their lesbian and gay parents. We suggest that one of the ways they are able to establish and maintain these positive identities, despite the negative discourses animating their experiences, is through the marginalization of the discourses that challenge the validity and morality of their family identities. Riessman (2000) claimed that individuals de-stigmatize the self by conceptualizing the stigmatized identity as a *difference* rather than a *failing*. Thus, participants asserted their families as different, but not wrong or unnatural, by strategically marginalizing the negative discourse. Norwood and Baxter (2011) argued for the potential usefulness of the strategic positioning of discourses in their study of letters written by adoptive parents to the birth parents of their adopted children. For example, the authors argued that parents may privilege the discourses of adoption as good rather than discourses that condemn adoption in order to persuade birth mothers to choose them as the adoptive parents of their babies. For our participants, the positioning of discourses acts as a strategic tool for removing the formative influence of discourses that oppress and marginalize their familial identities.

Our findings regarding the positioning of discourses also shed light on children's coping responses to the stigma associated with their familial identities. Lynch (2000) claimed that lesbian and gay parented families must develop strategies to deal with the cultural stigma they face. People with stigmatized identities often use cognitive restructuring to maintain a sense of

control over situations in which they experience stigma (Miller & Kaiser, 2001). Miller and Kaiser (2001) explained that through cognitive restructuring, people cope with stigma and discrimination by devaluing the source of the stigma, or by attributing the stigma in ways that are self-protective. Individuals with stigmatized identities sometimes accomplish this invalidation of stigma by redefining it as ignorance or intolerance (Almack, 2007; Buseh & Stevens, 2007). In the current study, the negative discourses were marginalized in participants' talk and were attributed to lack of knowledge, inexperience, and flawed information. Through this strategic positioning, participants were able to guard themselves from the influence the stigmatization may have on their familial identities.

Importantly, some participants gave voice to both the discourse of lesbian and gay identities as acceptable and as wrong. Though these participants did not adopt these discourses as their own, they validated these discourses in their efforts to understand why people espouse them and by arguing for the rights of people to do so. Some children of lesbian and gay parents view their family identity as a political issue, engaging with those espousing opposing views as a form of activism or education (Goldberg, 2007; Tasker & Golombok, 1995). Thus, allowing a direct interplay of competing discourses may be a strategic way for children of lesbian and gay parents to refute discourses against their parents' sexual identities, engaging these opposing discourses and subsequently rebutting them.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Three limitations emerged from our study. Though Baxter recommends that scholars examine the utterances within the interviews for discourses that are *currently* competing in the participants' talk (Baxter, 2011), we examined discourses that took place in the past and over a period of time. Though we were able to gain rich understanding about participants' current

positioning of the discourses and the emerging meanings of having lesbian and gay parents, we list this as our first limitation because we were unable to examine the interplay of the discourses as they were competing, which was Baxter's (2011) intent in her rearticulation of the theory. Future researchers can speak to this limitation by examining the interplay of discourses just after the parents come out and thus, at the height of the interplay of conflicting discourses, though these individuals may be difficult to find.

A second limitation of our study is that it only involved participants who are supportive of their lesbian and gay parents and who overwhelmingly embrace the discourse of support, which reflects a selection bias. It is likely that other adults with lesbian and gay parents are currently struggling or are not as accepting of their parents' sexual identities. As these individuals did not participate in our study, we were unable to offer as complete a picture of the experiences of children with lesbian and gay parents as we could have if they had. Both this and the previous limitation arose due to difficulty in identifying participants who are either willing to discuss the process as it is occurring, or to reveal their negative bias toward lesbian and gay identities. We suggest that researchers continue attempts to find more diversity among internet sites and blogs in which children may discuss their experiences with having lesbian and gay parents.

The third limitation of our study concerns the influence of the interview process on the salience of discourses in the participants' talk about their familial identity. Though both positive and negative discourses were present in participants' talk about their familial identities (before during and after the coming out process), it is possible that participating in the interviews brought this to the forefront for our participants as they were asked to discuss the messages they received and/or co-created about their families, which may have influenced their inclusion of

these discourses in their talk with the interviewer about their familial identity. Future researchers could avoid this limitation by gathering participants' stories through more broadly phrased questions and/or access narratives in other ways (e.g., written accounts).

Overall, though researchers are making great strides in understanding the lived experiences of families with lesbian and gay parents more research is needed to understand the communicative processes of this unique family form. Our study adds to the extant literature by examining the relational and cultural discourses that interplay to create meaning for children who have had parents come out to them. Further, through the use of RDT 2.0 we began to understand discursive power in participants' talk about their familial identities and how participants make sense of, and organize, the conflicting messages they receive in their culture and in their relationships regarding family identities. As lesbian and gay parented families continue to experience stigma and heteronormativity in culture, it is important that researchers continue to explore relational and cultural discourses and their formative role in identity creation and maintenance.

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