

# Coming to Terms With Coming Out: Review and Recommendations for Family Systems–Focused Research

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For lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) adolescents and young adults, coming out to family members, especially parents, is a major psychological decision and hurdle due to both perceived fears and actual negative consequences. But beyond the literature on factors associated with the decision to come out and parents' initial reactions to the disclosure, empirical studies of what unfolds afterward, and how the family adjusts to the LGB adolescent's identity over time, are sparse and scattered. This article reviews and integrates findings from studies of the individual-, dyadic-, and family-level variables associated with positive outcomes, focusing particularly on relationship variables. Methodological concerns within this body of research are discussed, and research recommendations are offered. A preliminary working model of how families successfully come to terms with coming out is proposed to guide future research that will advance theory and clinical work with LGB youth and their families.

*Keywords:* coming out, family processes, research review

For lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) young people, the act of disclosing their LGB identity to others (“coming out”) represents a major psychological decision. For those who do decide to come out, coming out to family, especially parents, is often the biggest challenge (Savin-Williams, 2003). Both perceived fears and actual negative consequences are well documented and include rejection, guilt, and desire to protect the family from crisis (Ben-Ari, 1995; Cramer & Roach, 1988; D’Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2005). Yet clinical experience and narrative reports reveal that the actual processes and outcomes of coming out, including subsequent family dynamics and long-term adjustments, vary greatly across families. Some parents withdraw support, rejecting their LGB offspring (Saltzberg, 1996), while others come to accept and/or affirm their LGB offspring and his or her sexual identity, with any number of other variations in between (D’Augelli, 2005; Savin-Williams, 1998b).

Given such variability, the critical question is: What factors and processes matter as families adjust to the disclosure of their LGB family member’s sexual orientation, and in particular, what variables are associated with positive

outcomes for LGB offspring and their families? Positive outcomes should be conceptualized as a set of dynamically interrelated adjustments within and among family members on three dimensions: acceptance or affirmation of the sexual identity by the LGB individual and parents, emotional well-being<sup>1</sup> of the offspring and family members (at least to predisclosure levels), and healthy family environment and interactions (again, at least as healthy as predisclosure). This process may be broadly expressed by the overarching question: What facilitates the family’s coming to terms with coming out? Though this question is of clear theoretical and clinical importance, an adequate answer is not yet available due to large gaps in the content of what has been studied and persistent methodological limitations of the research strategies employed in existing work. The vast majority of studies focus on initial family reactions to disclosure, and few address the processes and outcomes of longer term family adjustment. Moreover, the research literature is highly disintegrated, with specific findings scattered in journals across different disciplines (e.g., family studies, LGB studies, sociology, developmental psychology, clinical psychology) and a corresponding lack of conceptual integration. Thus the aim of this article is to (a) comprehensively review and summarize the relevant research findings in a family systems–focused framework for integrating them and accommodating new findings, (b) provide some methodological observations and recommendations for this research, and (c) in doing so, suggest a preliminary conceptual model for future research that may advance theory and clinical practice.

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<sup>1</sup> Different authors refer to this as “mental health” or “emotional adjustment.”

### Review Procedures

The formal review was limited to empirical studies of coming out to the family and subsequent family process among LGB adolescents and young adults.<sup>2</sup> This is the most common time of disclosure and a time when families are still a major source of financial, psychological, and social support. Specifically, we included studies in which at least two quantitative variables were examined in relation to each other and excluded qualitative and descriptive research such as first-person accounts, narrative interviews, grounded theory research, or studies in which only one variable was assessed (e.g., studies of the percentage of parents who were accepting of the young person's sexual orientation at the time of disclosure). Although such studies were not included in the formal review or tables, they were read and are informally discussed when they are conceptually or heuristically useful. Various combinations of the keywords *coming out*, *gay*, *lesbian*, and *family* were used to search the following databases and journals from 1987 (or date of first issue) to 2007<sup>3</sup>: PsycInfo, Sociological Abstracts, PubMed, *Journal of Homosexuality*, *Journal of LGBT Family Studies*, *Journal of Family Psychology*, *Journal of Men and Masculinity*, *Developmental Psychology*, *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, *Journal of Adolescence*, *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *Journal of Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, *Family Relations*, and *Psychological Bulletin*. Reviews were included, but dissertations and studies in languages other than English were not.

To characterize the nature of these studies, we grouped them into two main sets. The first set is studies that focus on individual variables, including those in which characteristics of individual family members, such as demographic variables or traits, are treated as predictors in relation to some outcome. In the vast majority of studies, outcome has been something about disclosure, such as whether it has occurred or not, the timing of it, or something about parents' immediate reactions to disclosure. Studies that examined two or more of these predictor variables in interaction with each other (e.g., the gender of the parent and the gender of the offspring) were also included here, as were studies in which the individual predictors were something about the LGB person, such as identity status and the person's own acceptance of orientation). There are many studies of individual variables—enough to have previously been at least partly reviewed and critiqued (cf. Green, 2000; Savin-Williams, 2003; Savin-Williams & Dubé, 1998). Thus, these findings are simply summarized and updated.

The second set includes studies that focus on relationship variables, either dyadic (or a mix of dyadic and individual) variables or those that focus on whole family (or a mix of family, dyadic, and individual) variables, such as support, cohesion, or adaptability. Depending on the study, these variables were used as predictors, outcomes, or both. That is, in some studies, characteristics of the relationship between the LGB offspring and a family member (e.g., attachment with mother, relationship satisfaction with father) were used as predictors, and the outcomes were individual

variables (e.g., likelihood of disclosure, self-esteem). In other studies, some aspect of the relationship was an outcome (e.g., parent–adolescent conflict). This set of studies is the most central and important to this article, as they focus on relationships and interpersonal interaction and thus have the most potential for informing an understanding of family process and, ultimately, intervention strategies. In contrast to the wealth of studies on individual variables, there are far fewer studies of relationship variables. Moreover, the study methodologies are more diverse, more complex, and more in need of discussion. Hence, the findings and methodologies of these studies are reviewed in depth. Tables 1 and 2 display each study separately, highlighting methodological features that are a focus of discussion in the text—that is, sample, measurement/design/analysis strategy, and variables studied—as well as its key findings. A critical analysis of the research is then offered, followed by a preliminary conceptual model to guide future research.

### Individual-Level Variables: Summary

Studies of individual-level variables, especially demographic variables, are by far the most numerous and reveal several consistent findings: First, gender matters. Research on families has generally indicated that fathers are less likely to be told, less likely to be told first, and likely to react more negatively to disclosure than are mothers (Ben-Ari, 1995; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998; Maguen, Floyd, Bakeman, & Armistead, 2002; Savin-Williams, 1998b). In the experience of gay men, fathers and brothers were more likely to be verbally abusive than were mothers and sisters (D'Augelli et al., 1998). However, not all studies concur with this pattern. Savin-Williams's (2001) interviews with 164 LGB youths indicated that the initial reaction from mothers was slightly more negative than that from fathers, leading him to question whether fathers respond more negatively than mothers. A study of Australian youths (Hillier, 2002) found relatively equal percentages of support among mothers and fathers, and another recent study found no differences in the percentage of mothers and fathers who had "very positive" or "positive" reactions (D'Augelli et al., 2005), suggesting that these gender differences may not be as prevalent today as they once were. The parent gender and LGB youth

<sup>2</sup> Though we follow the convention of using *LGB* to describe sexual minority youth, the limited research on bisexual youth restricted our review and conclusions to gay and lesbian youth. Three excellent studies of family variables with slightly older adult (participants in their 30s) or mixed youth/adult samples were also included.

<sup>3</sup> Thus these were studies of the post-AIDS cohort, born after 1969. Cohort differences matter (Grierson & Smith, 2005; Savin-Williams, 1998a)—hence the decision to restrict the literature review. Even so, some caution is needed in generalizing any results in this area, as social and attitudinal changes about homosexuality (especially among young people) that impact family relationships may well change faster than researchers can fully keep pace with.

Table 1  
*Studies of Dyadic-Level Variables*

Study	Sample	Measurement/ design (analysis)	Key variables	Key findings
Beals & Peplau (2006)	55 F, 89 M; median age 25 yrs; 5% AfA, 10% AsA, 19% Lat, 54% CA	Self-report, youth report about parents; retrospective and current/correlational (HLM)	Relationship quality pre- and postdisclosure, initial and current parents' acceptance, disclosure status/parameters	Relationship quality and disclosure status associated, more strongly for women. Direct (vs. indirect) disclosure associated with both higher relationship quality and acceptance.
Floyd, Stein, Harter, Allison, & Nye (1999)	36 F, 36 M; age 16–27 yrs; 6% AfA, 7% AsA, 3% NA, 79% CA	Self-report, youth report about parents; current/correlational (multiple regression)	Separation–individuation, parents' acceptance, youth identity consolidation, youth well-being	Closer relatedness and greater conflictual independence associated with youth perceptions of parents' accepting attitudes. More separation–individuation, and relationships with both parents important for youth well-being.
Holtzen, Kenny, & Mahalik (1995)	41 F, 72 M; median age 28 yrs; 92% CA	Self-report, youth report about parents; current/correlational (canonical analysis)	Parental attachment, disclosure, youth's dysfunctional cognitions	Secure attachments to mother and father associated with disclosure, length of time since disclosure, and fewer dysfunctional cognitions.
Mohr & Fassinger (2003)	288 L&Bi F, 201 G&Bi M; median age 36 yrs; 3% AfA, 1% AsA, 3% Lat, 5% biracial, 85% CA	Self-report, family report; retrospective/current/correlational (SEM)	Past and current attachments, parent support for sexual orientation, self-acceptance, outness	Fathers' support had direct negative associations with outness and self-acceptance; mothers' support had indirect associations with these variables through general attachment. Perceived mother and father caregiving sensitivity in childhood had wholly indirect effects on outness and self-acceptance, through parental support and general attachment.
Savin-Williams (1989a)	103 F, 214 M; age 14–23 yrs; 2% AfA, 2% AsA, 3% Lat, 1% NA, 91% CA; 34% upper-middle, 35% middle, 25% lower-middle class	Self-report, youth report about parents; current/correlational (multiple regression)	Relationship satisfaction with parent, parent awareness of youth sexual orientation, youth self-esteem, gender of youth and parent, other parent demographics	For girls, self-esteem predicted by relationship satisfaction with mother. For boys, self-esteem predicted by relationship satisfaction with each parent, mother's awareness, and less contact with father.
Savin-Williams (1989b)	Same sample as Savin-Williams (1989a)	Self-report, youth report about parents; current/correlational (multiple regression)	Parents' acceptance, youth self-esteem, youth comfort with sexual identity, importance of parent to youth self-worth, gender of youth and parent	Youth comfort with sexual identity predicted by mother and father acceptance for girls. For boys, comfort predicted by interaction of parents' acceptance and importance of parents to self-worth. Comfort also predicted self-esteem.
Savin-Williams & Ream (2003)	78 F, 86 M; 4% AfA, 10% AsA, 7% Lat, 75% CA; 42% upper-middle, 35% middle, 23% lower-middle class	Youth report about parents; retrospective and current/group comparisons (hierarchical log-linear analysis, chi-square, repeated measures analysis of variance)	Disclosure status and parameters, closeness to parent, parents' reactions, postdisclosure relationship with parent	Lack of disclosure to fathers associated with lack of closeness; to mothers, it was linked more to "not the right time." Sons feared parents' reactions more than daughters did. Mothers' and fathers' reactions did not differ, and closeness did not decline postdisclosure.

*Note.* F = female; M = male; yrs = years; AfA = African American; AsA = Asian American; Lat = Latino/a; CA = Caucasian; HLM = hierarchical linear modeling; NA = Native American; L&Bi = lesbian and bisexual; G&Bi = gay and bisexual.

Table 2  
*Studies of Family-Level Variables*

Study	Sample	Measurement/design (analysis)	Key variables	Key findings
Darby-Mullins & Murdock (2007)	34 F, 65 M; 68 LGQ, 32 Bi; age 15–19 yrs; 15% AfA, <1% AsA, 7% Lat, 72% CA	Self-report and family report by youth; current/correlational (multiple regression)	Family environment, parental support, parent attitudes toward homosexuality, youth self-acceptance of sexual identity, youth emotional adjustment	Youth emotional adjustment predicted by better general family functioning, better parent attitudes toward homosexuality, and self-acceptance.
Elizur & Mintzer (2001)	121 Israeli M; <i>M</i> age 32 yrs	Self-report, participant report about family; current/correlational (multiple regression and mediation analysis)	Family support, family attitudes toward homosexuality, friend's support, self-definition, self-acceptance, current attachment style, disclosure	Secure current attachments related to self-acceptance and friends' support. Positive family attitudes toward homosexuality mediated link between general family support and disclosure.
Elizur & Ziv (2001)	114 Israeli M; 62% < 29 yrs old; 95% < 39 yrs old	Self-report, participant report about family; current/correlational (path analysis)	Family support, family acceptance of orientation, gay identity formation, participant's self-esteem and mental health	Family support predicted LGB person's mental health and identity formation. Family acceptance of orientation partially or fully mediated these effects.
Hershberger & D'Augelli (1995)	42 F, 123 M; age 15–21 yrs; 6% AsA, 13% AfA, 5% Lat, 3% NA, 67% CA	Self-report and family report by youth; current/correlational (SEM)	Victimization, family support, self-acceptance, suicidality, mental health	Self-acceptance and family support together mediated relationship between victimization and mental health. High family support moderates the impact of certain kinds of victimization on mental health.
Waldner & Magruder (1999)	85 F, 87 M; age 14–18 yrs; largely middle class; race and ethnicity unknown	Self-report and family report by youth; retrospective to before coming out and current/correlational (SEM)	Family relations, lesbian/gay resources, expression of gay/lesbian identity, disclosure of identity	Better family relations associated with less perceived LGB-supportive resources and less LGB identity expression, both of which were positively associated with disclosure. Effect of family relations on disclosure was fully indirect.
Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl (2006)	74 M; age 18–26 yrs; 10% AfA or AfCar, 39% Lat, 39% CA	Family report by young adults; retrospective to 14 yrs old and to age of coming out/group comparisons	Family cohesion, family adaptability	Predisclosure cohesion and adaptability were each associated with less negative mothers' and fathers' reactions. Authoritative (vs. authoritarian) parenting was associated with less negative reactions.

*Note.* F = female; M = male; LGQ = lesbian/gay/queer; Bi = bisexual; yrs = years; AfA = African American; AsA = Asian American; Lat = Latino/a; CA = Caucasian; NA = Native American; AfCar = African Caribbean.

gender in combination also matter, but in less consistent ways. Father–lesbian daughter pairs seem to experience the most difficulty.

Regarding race and ethnicity, the few studies in which ethnicity was systematically examined as a variable in fam-

ilies with LGB offspring suggest that non-Caucasian race and minority ethnicity are generally associated with a lower likelihood of disclosure to parents. A survey of 14- to 27-year-old LGB young people (Maguen et al., 2002) found that male African Americans were less likely than male

Caucasians to disclose to their parents, especially to their fathers, consistent with Dubé and Savin-Williams' (1999) findings in an exclusively male sample. Research with adults is generally consistent; for example, in a recent survey of over 2,700 LGB individuals from a wide range of ages attending LGB community events (Groß, Bimbi, Nannin, & Parsons, 2006), 77% of Caucasian American men and 80% of Caucasian women indicated they were out to their parents; comparative figures for African American men and women and Latino/as were 62% and 61%, and 69% and 72%, respectively. Only 51% of Asian/Pacific Islander men had disclosed to parents. These findings may be related to factors such as perceived conflicts between respecting cultural upbringing and establishing a new gay identity, concerns about how disclosure may affect others' perceptions of the family, and family and gender role expectations (Greene, 1998; Merighi & Grimes, 2000). Again, these studies focused on disclosure; there is virtually no empirical research on how race and ethnicity impact post-disclosure adjustment.

The findings concerning religion are the most consistent. A study of gay males ages 17–20 (Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993) found that those from families with highly traditional values (operationally defined as importance of religion to the family, importance to the family that they marry, importance to the family that they have children, and whether a language besides English was spoken in the home) perceived their family's feelings toward homosexuality to be more negative than did those from less traditional families, and reported marginally more negative family reactions to disclosure as compared with those from less traditional families. In this small-sample ( $n = 27$ ) study, traditional values mattered while race did not. Schope (2002) found that a young adult cohort (16- to 30-year-olds) of gay men were less likely to have disclosed if their parents were very religious (versus nonreligious); 40% of the former but only 24% of the latter were still closeted.<sup>4</sup> Further, religion may influence another variable that is correlated with how parents respond to their child's coming out: preexisting attitudes regarding homosexuality. Preexisting positive attitudes have been shown to predict positive reactions to one's child's disclosure. In a study of young adults and their parents, Ben-Ari (1995) found that parents who had at least some previous exposure to gay culture were more likely to react positively to disclosure. And a large analogue study (Armesto & Weisman, 2001) in which participants were asked to imagine their gay son coming out to them found that more negative reactions, less affection, and less willingness to help the hypothetical child were associated with believing that being homosexual was something the child could control. African American and Asian American participants were more likely than Caucasian Americans to articulate negative emotional reactions and less willingness to help the hypothetical child.

Finally, individual differences in LGB offspring are also important. Savin-Williams and Dubé (1998) suggest that variables such as the child's status in the home, age of disclosure, place of residence, involvement in a romantic relationship, and pride in same-sex attractions may affect

parental reactions, although limited research has examined these factors. Also, firsthand accounts (Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001) suggest that some children's gender atypical behaviors may lead some parents to suspect early on that their child may be LGB; this early awareness may allow parents to work through feelings of guilt, fear for the child's welfare, and anticipated losses (marriage, grandchildren). Disclosure may be more troublesome for parents whose children "did not appear to be 'gay'" while growing up (D'Augelli et al., 2005, p. 481). The nature of disclosure itself can also influence parents' reactions. The parents of gay men and lesbians who disclosed their sexual orientation with positive information (e.g., "I am gay and very happy") adjusted more easily to the revelation than if their children disclosed negatively or with a more neutral statement (Ben-Ari, 1995), suggesting that LGB individuals' own level of comfort with their sexuality may have an important effect on parents' subsequent reactions. Also, the nature of what is disclosed in addition to sexual orientation (e.g., "I'm bisexual but have never had a sexual relationship with anyone," "I'm gay and HIV positive") is likely to affect parents' initial reactions and the adjustment process in very different ways.

This body of research provides evidence that certain demographic and other individual variables of parents and LGB offspring are associated with disclosure itself and with parents' initial reactions. In considering these various factors, it is important to note that although these variables are often treated separately, people clearly have multiple identities (e.g., Latino Christian gay; black bisexual; gay white male) that complicate straightforward predictions. The fact of multiple identities necessitates careful and full descriptions of samples and more inclusive samples, thoughtfulness in asking research questions about the meaning of various identities as they relate to the coming out process, and at the very least, more specificity in hypotheses and interpretations. Further, aside from some thoughtful speculations from interview studies (cf. Dempsey, 1994; Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001), there is no research on how these variables operate, either at the time of disclosure or in the subsequent years of family life. From a family systems perspective, the important question is how these individual-level variables impact interpersonal relationship processes (e.g., Does religiosity work to facilitate family cohesion in the midst of a coming out crisis? Or do certain religious beliefs or affiliations create a "don't ask, don't tell" dynamic that emotionally isolates the youth and parent?) It is in the dyadic and whole family contexts that individual traits, beliefs, values, fears, and hopes get played out, and thus, relationship variables are important factors in eventual outcome.

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<sup>4</sup> Only an older study with adult gay sons (Cramer & Roach, 1988) showed inconsistent findings—that more traditional mothers and more religious fathers were perceived as more accepting.

## Relationship Variables: Review of Research

### *Dyadic-Level Variables*

There are far fewer studies of dyadic relationship variables than of individual-level variables; we located just seven studies (six different samples) with adolescents/young adults (see Table 1). These focus mainly on how emotional bonds/relationship quality in parent-child dyads are associated with disclosure and LGB youth well-being.

*Parent-child relationship quality.* In general, higher parent-child relationship quality before disclosure has been shown to be associated with greater likelihood of disclosure and more positive parental reactions to disclosure. In a large sample of 17- to 25-year-old male and female college students, Savin-Williams and Ream (2003) found that lack of closeness with the father was an important factor in non-disclosure to him, while closeness with the mother was a motivation for disclosure. Men who disclosed to fathers were more likely than women to be motivated by hopes of eliciting support, while daughters were more likely to disclose to fathers to get it over with. Youth reported that parent-child relationships in general were unchanged or improved following disclosure, although (by participants' report) mothers' reactions were rated as more improved than fathers' over time. Another study (Beals & Peplau, 2006) with 144 gay and lesbian university students provided some support for the suggestion that relationship quality may be strengthened by, as well as facilitative of, disclosure. Participants rated the prior and current relationship quality, nature of disclosure (direct or indirect), time since disclosure, initial reactions, and current identity acceptance for each member of their close social network, including family members. Relationship quality was higher with family members who knew than with those who did not know about the young adult's sexual orientation, and higher for those who found out directly versus indirectly. Mean current versus prior relationship quality with family members did not differ significantly, but there was much variation across participants.

Findings from Savin-Williams's (1989a, 1989b) religiously and geographically diverse sample of 317 gay and lesbian young people recruited from gay organizations and events and campus networking also suggest important associations between parent-child relationship quality and LGB well-being. All variables were assessed by participant self-report. Satisfaction with the maternal relationship was significantly positively related to lesbians' comfort with their sexual orientation (this was not so for satisfaction with the paternal relationship) though not with their self-esteem. For gay men, satisfaction with the maternal relationship as well as satisfaction with the paternal relationship both predicted comfort with being gay—but only if they felt that their parents were important to their self-worth (Savin-Williams, 1989b). Further analyses (Savin-Williams, 1989a) revealed that satisfying relationships with parents (and having young parents) predicted whether lesbian daughters had come out to their parents but not whether gay sons had come out. In general, those who reported satisfying

relationships with their parents also had higher self-esteem. There were suggestive findings that parents' socioeconomic status moderated these results (e.g., the relationship between positive parent relationships and high self-esteem was particularly strong in professional families). These findings highlight a more general pattern in which individual demographic-type variables and relationship variables were jointly operative in several of the dyadic and family studies, underscoring the importance of considering interactions between predictor variables.

*Attachment.* Attachment has also been shown to be associated with several outcome variables. In a sample of men and women recruited through Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) groups and college campus LGB support groups, participants with more self-reported secure attachment to parents (on dimensions of affective quality of attachment, parental fostering of autonomy, parental emotional support) were significantly more likely to have disclosed, more likely to have been "out" to the parent for longer, and less likely to report dysfunctional cognitions reflecting Beck's negative triad of depressive thoughts about oneself, others, and the future (Holtzen, Kenny, & Mahalik, 1995). Attachment was treated as the predictor, and disclosure variables and dysfunctional attitudes were treated as the criteria; the results held for relationships with fathers and with mothers, assessed separately, and with participant age partialled out. Noting that the results are consistent with attachment theory, Holtzen et al. (1995) call coming out a "secure base" behavior (p. 350). However, they caution that their cross-sectional design does not allow the firm conclusion that attachment is a cause of disclosure or of cognitive style rather than a consequence.

Mohr and Fassinger (2003) used structural equation modeling to chart the direct and indirect links between childhood attachment, parental support for sexual orientation, current attachment in social relationships, and two key dimensions of LGB experience—disclosure and self-acceptance—in a sample of 489 LGB adults (median age = 36 years). Gender and family affiliation with an antigay religious group were included as potential moderators. Paternal support for sexual orientation was directly associated with disclosure and self-acceptance, and maternal support was indirectly associated with disclosure through general attachment pattern. The effects of childhood attachments (perceptions of mother's and father's sensitivity) were wholly indirectly associated with disclosure and self-acceptance through general attachment and parental support for sexual orientation. The associations between childhood attachment and current attachments were not significant in participants whose families had antigay religious affiliation; Mohr and Fassinger suggest that these adults "may be more likely . . . to cut off a sense of emotional connectedness with parents" (p. 492). Again, the results could reflect a causal connection or a perceptual bias, but they do provide preliminary evidence of the importance of attachments in family adjustments to disclosure of an alternative sexuality.

*Individuation.* Individuation in adolescence can be considered a "secure base" behavior as well, and negative parent attitudes about sexual orientation may impede the

developmental task of managing autonomy while retaining relatedness with parents. In a study with 72 LGB young people recruited from support groups, organizations, and ads (Floyd, Stein, Harter, Allison, & Nye, 1999), separation-individuation and conflictual independence (i.e., internalized conflicts about autonomy; higher scores denote less conflict) were examined in relation to parents' attitudes regarding the child's sexual orientation as perceived by the child. Again, with interviews and questionnaires completed by the LGB participant, they found that more positive parent attitudes were significantly correlated with greater conflictual independence (fewer negative emotions related to separation) and greater relatedness (closeness, empathy) with both fathers and mothers. The latter variables were, in turn, associated with higher youth self-esteem. Autonomy from fathers was associated in the same directions with these variables, but with mothers the results were more complicated. Autonomy and self-esteem were positively associated only when relatedness with mother was low, and autonomy from mother and self-esteem were significantly correlated for girls but not for boys. Also, relatedness with each of the parents was inversely correlated with symptom distress, such as feelings of anxiety, depression, and hostility. This study is one of few that examined relationship dynamics and youth emotional well-being in tandem. These findings, along with Savin-Williams's (1989a, 1989b) and indeed most of the dyadic studies, illustrate (a) the many ways in which the dyadic relationships of LGB young people and their parents are complicated by gender and (b) the need for analyses and eventually models that take both the gender of the LGB person and the parents into account (Savin-Williams, 1989b).

### *Family-Level Variables*

This set of studies concerns how characteristics of the family system as a whole relate to LGB offsprings' well-being and/or family adjustment after disclosure. Crosbie-Burnett, Foster, Murray, and Bowen (1996) argue that disclosure adds stress to both the individual and the family system, as family members may adopt new roles in response to disclosure and shifts in subsystems, boundaries, hierarchies, and communication patterns occur. Walsh (2003) argues that in perceived crises, families' adaptations can be understood by examining three key domains of resilience: organizational patterns, communication/problem solving, and making meaning of adversity. Whether the question is framed in terms of risk or resilience, it is likely that family-level variables will both influence and be shaped by such adjustment. Further, from a clinical perspective, family relationship factors, in contrast to individual-level factors such as demographic characteristics or personality, are particularly amenable to intervention and thus of particular import. Nonetheless, empirical studies that include family-level variables are rare; we located just six (see Table 2).

*Family cohesion/closeness/support.* Cohesion is a common element in family theories, and it was, in one form or another, the most likely to be included in family studies of coming out. In general, family cohesion matters—but in

some surprising ways. In a study of 172 adolescent gays and lesbians of varying disclosure statuses—from parents' having “no idea” to being “fully aware”—Waldner and Magruder (1999) used structural equation modeling to study the associations between (a) predisclosure family relations as rated by the adolescent on a single item (“how well did you get along with your family?”) along with two individual variables (identity expression and pro-lesbian/gay resources) and (b) coming out to parents. Family relations were not associated with disclosure status directly but rather indirectly through “identity expression” (adolescent's participation in LGB groups and frequency of sexual activity) and “perceived resources” (the number of pro-gay supportive people in the adolescent's social network, including family members). Somewhat surprisingly, in the former result, better family relations were (indirectly) associated with less identity expression and fewer perceived supportive resources. Waldner and Magruder speculate that those who get along well with their families may judge it more costly to express a gay identity or to seek out supportive gay resources—in violation of the presumed family heterosexual norms—due to concerns that the “strong family ties” prior to disclosure may be lost afterward. They note further that in the suburban, East Coast United States, upper-middle-class community from which their sample was drawn, opportunities for identity expression and the availability of pro-lesbian/gay resources are greater than in rural or low-income areas, suggesting that rural or low-income young people with strong family ties may be even more reluctant to disclose.

In a study of the impact of victimization on the mental health of LGB youth, Hershberger and D'Augelli (1995) tested a structural model of the relationships between family support, self-acceptance, victimization, mental health problems, and suicidality. One hundred sixty-five respondents, mostly male, from lesbian and gay community center groups completed a packet of measures about victimization, perceived family variables, and their own acceptance and mental health. The latent variable of family support was assessed through three indicators: “family acceptance” (respondents' ratings of mothers', fathers', and siblings' acceptance of their sexual orientation on a scale from 1 to 4), “family protection” (a simple count of who had offered protection), and “family relations” (a rating from 0 to 3 that combined the degree of disclosure and the family's reaction or anticipated reaction). The revised structural model provided evidence that family support mediated the relationship between victimization and mental health, but only when acting in concert with the critical variable of self-acceptance (which eclipsed all other variables, even victimization, in its correlation with mental health). The path model supported the following sequence: victimization → family support → self-acceptance → mental health. Further, there was some evidence for moderating effects of family support on the impact of victimization on mental health; family support reduced this association, but only when victimization was low (i.e., at the level of verbal comments). At higher levels of victimization (property destruction, physical attacks), family support did not act as a buffer

on the impact of victimization on mental health problems. Neither the family variables nor self-acceptance predicted suicidality.

Finally, two Israeli studies that included young adults as well as youth focused on global family variables. Elizur and Ziv (2001) tested a conceptual path model of the relationships between family processes, same-sex identity formation, and psychological adjustment in a sample of 114 Israeli gay men who were in varying stages of gay identity formation and varying stages of being “out” to others. The data best fit a model in which the positive effect of family support on psychological adjustment was partially mediated by family acceptance and in which the positive effect of family support on identity formation and family knowledge of same-sex orientation was fully mediated by family acceptance of that orientation. They interpret the findings as pointing to resiliency factors: General family support and, in particular, family acceptance of orientation can have protective effects independent of social support from friends and “families of choice.” In a different sample, Elizur and Mintzer (2001) studied the links between three basic processes of gay identity development (self-definition, self-acceptance, and disclosure) and attachment style and social support, with particular attention to family support in general and family acceptance of same-sex orientation as they relate to disclosure. Family support was measured by a 20-item perceived social support scale, and family acceptance was measured by having respondents rate each of seven different family members’ actual or presumed responses to his same-sex orientation on a 9-point scale ranging from acceptance to rejection. Apparently, these were summed and the total score was used as the metric. Both family variables were significantly correlated with disclosure, and family acceptance of same-sex orientation mediated the effects of general family support on disclosure, suggesting that “supportive families are more likely to adopt supportive attitudes toward their sons’ sexual orientation, which in turn promotes the disclosure to family and heterosexual friends” (p. 161). Elizur and Mintzer note that their results dovetail with Hershberger and D’Augelli’s (1995), Savin-Williams’s (1989a, 1989b), and others’ to demonstrate the importance of family variables in gay/lesbian young people’s well-being but that other research (cf. Green, 2000) does not find family variables to be important for the well-being of LGB individuals. They suggest a possible reason for this discrepancy: Family processes may be more important in populations in which the family-of-origin context is particularly strong and present—such as adolescents, rural gays/lesbians from small towns, and people in cultures such as Israel where family members are closely tied geographically and emotionally—versus in those populations in which it is not, such as adults, urban gay/lesbian couples living far from families of origin, etc.

*Global family climate.* Two recent studies empirically examined more global family climate and reactions to disclosure. Darby-Mullins and Murdock (2007) studied 15- to 19-year-olds recruited from LGB support groups, a sample that was unusual in its inclusion of a fair number of bisexuals. Again, respondents completed a packet of question-

naires assessing their perceptions of their family life and their well-being and self-acceptance. The young people’s perceptions of their current family environment (cohesion, conflict, and expressiveness were measured separately but ultimately combined for the analyses) did not account for a significant amount of variance in self-acceptance of sexual orientation, nor did parental attitudes toward homosexuality. Family environment did, however, account for a significant amount of variance in youth emotional adjustment (and was not moderated by self-acceptance of sexual orientation).

Two other systemic variables—adaptability (“the extent to which a family is able to change when confronted with novel situations”) and cohesion (“the overall connectedness within the family system and the emotional bonding that family members have toward one another”)—were studied in association with parents’ responses to their sons’ coming out (Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006). The authors drew on family stress theory to argue that a family’s ability to cope with stressful life events is likely influenced by the family resources in place prior to the stressor’s onset. The participants (18- to 26-year-old gay men) were recruited from LGB organizations in university and community settings in the southeast United States. They were asked to think about their families when they were 14 years old (before they came out) and complete the Family Environment Scale (FES; Moos and Moos, 1994) and FACES III (Olson, Portner, & Lavee, 1985) retrospectively to that time. They were also asked to think back to the time of their coming out to complete the scale of parents’ reactions to the coming out. Prompts such as recalling place of residence and other major life events were used to aid participants in their recollection. The other measures, including parenting style, were completed from the present perspective. The young men who reported levels of family cohesion above the sample median prior to coming out perceived both their mothers’ and fathers’ initial responses to coming out as less negative compared with the parents’ responses of men reporting lower family cohesion. Likewise, participants who reported levels of family adaptability that were above the median prior to coming out perceived both their mothers’ and fathers’ initial responses to coming out as less negative compared with the parents’ responses of men reporting lower family adaptability. Though the findings of both studies are limited by cross-sectional, retrospective designs (i.e., more emotionally adjusted adolescents may perceive their family environments more positively, and those whose parents reacted in a positive way to their coming out may perceive higher levels of cohesion and adaptability in their families), the results nonetheless provide some evidence that family-level variables are important.

Together, these findings provide evidence that family variables and processes can be both mediators and moderators (Baron & Kenny, 1986) as families come to terms with coming out. Family support, acceptance, and closeness, for example, have direct and indirect effects on the outcomes and well-being of some, but not all, LGB adolescents and young adults. Further, the associations between “fixed” individual variables (e.g., religiosity, socioeconomic status,

and ideology about homosexuality) and outcomes (initial family reactions to disclosure and adjustment over time of the LGB young person and other family members) can be moderated by family factors. For example, the link between religiosity and parents' acceptance may be strong and negative in chaotic, conflictual families but weak or even positive in highly cohesive families. This is because family processes provide the means for making meaning out of events, problem solving, and adapting to change. Family bonds and other characteristics may undergird perseverance toward the (ideally) dual goals of (1) supporting and affirming the LGB member in his/her identity and (2) keeping him/her comfortably within the physical and psychological circle of the family as well. Nonetheless, the review revealed a striking lack of research on dyadic and family-level relationship variables. Below we provide some suggestions for building this research base, in the context of a methodological critique and a preliminary conceptual model to help shape the research.

### Methodological Issues

First, the relationship-focused studies reveal what LGB offspring perceive their parents' and families' characteristics and attitudes to be but very little about whether those perceptions reflect their actual characteristics, or at least their characteristics as assessed by other means. In all of the studies in Tables 1 and 2, the only participants were LGB respondents and the only data were their reports—about their own characteristics and feelings (e.g., self-esteem), their parents' characteristics and attitudes (e.g., acceptance of their sexual orientation), and the dyadic relationship (e.g., closeness with mother), and/or the family relationship as a whole (e.g., cohesion). These perceptions were then used, by default, as veridical measures of those variables; what is really the respondent's perceptions of family cohesion becomes treated as "family cohesion" in models and interpretations, with varying levels of caution. There are a number of problems with this, including the validity of the measurement itself and the fact that shared method variance may yield spuriously high associations between variables; these have been discussed previously by a number of authors but persist anyway. This issue is important because the little comparative information available from studies in which both LGB offspring and their parents were assessed on the same variable suggests that there might be systematic biases: There is some evidence that in terms of "how well are things going?" the picture painted by parents tends to be rosier than that of the LGB youth, at least at or near the time of disclosure (Ben-Ari, 1995). Thus, such singular measures of adjustment may be relative overestimates if provided by the parents and relative underestimates if provided by the LGB person. There is little information, moreover, about this gap between their perceptions and whether it closes over time; it would be useful to study whether their versions of how well things are going in the family tend to converge over time or whether, even long after disclosure, parents' perceptions of the relationship are still more positive than adolescents' (with a check on whether this gap is any larger

for LGB youth and parents than it is in general for straight youth and their parents about any family issue). Use of multiple informants can also provide more systemically rich information: In an analysis of the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Add Health) dataset, for example, Russell, Seif, and Truong (2001) examined sexual minority adolescents' and their mothers' reports of mother-child relationship quality and time spent together. Girls who reported exclusive attractions to other girls had the lowest scores on a maternal relationship scale, and their mothers independently reported more negativity toward their daughters than did other girls and mothers. Russell and colleagues note that these findings provide persuasive evidence "of the critical need for support for mothers when daughters come to terms with a minority sexual orientation" (p. 122). Few studies are able to support such claims because they fail to include both sexual minority offspring and their parents.

Second, there are particular concerns about the measurement of dyadic, and especially family-level, variables and whether they are, in fact, accurate relationship-level variables. The first concerns the way in which data about multiple family members, as reported by one person, are combined. In the Elizur and Mintzer (2001) and Hershberger and D'Augelli (1995) studies, for example, a single score of "family acceptance" or "family support," respectively, was derived by combining the LGB person's ratings of several different family members' acceptance (mother, father, sister, brother, etc.). Thus, a family in which the father and mother were completely rejecting and the siblings completely accepting would receive the same score as a family in which the siblings were completely rejecting and the parents completely accepting or a family in which all members were given midpoint ratings. The result is that the "overall" family rating does not represent, and may actually misrepresent, the psychological reality of the family system and thus muddies the findings and conclusions. This problem is common in family systems and family therapy research; we know that the family-level construct (in this case, "family acceptance") is something different from the sum of its parts (individual members' acceptances) but struggle to measure it (Heatherington, Friedlander, & Greenberg, 2005). One alternative is to create higher order, multiple categories from these data (e.g., "family all accepting," "family split with parents rejecting and siblings accepting," "family all rejecting"), although this too fails to capture more subtle variability (e.g., one parent accepting and one parent rejecting).

The second, and larger, concern is raised by Cook and Kenny's (2004, 2006) critique of measurements of family functioning that rely on individual self-reports. As they deftly show, such measures (imagine an item such as "my father and I are close") are most likely not capturing purely systemic (dyadic or whole family) level variables such as father-son closeness but rather some unknown mix of individual characteristics of the respondent (son), individual characteristics of the target (the father), and the nature of the dyad. Their alternative is to have each family member rate his/her closeness with each other member; their social relations model analysis (SRM; Kenny & Lavoie, 1984) then

examines how much of, say, a low closeness score was something unique to that dyad versus due to the son's not feeling close to anyone in the family or the father's being rated as not being close by anyone in the family. This raises the concern that, to date, no studies have truly adequately assessed actual dyadic- or family-level variables that are associated with positive adjustments to coming out. To build accurate models, we need to assess actual systems-level variables in order to test whether there are reliable connections between them. We need to know, for example, if preexisting family cohesion (not just one person's perception of cohesion) is really a resilience factor—if it predicts sustained closeness with the parent (not just one member of the dyad's perception of closeness) after the coming out. Though it might be argued that what really matters from a clinical point of view is what the LGB young person perceives—because the phenomenological experience of the client is what the clinician works with—knowing the father's as well as the son's perceptions of their dyadic closeness (and indeed, following the full SRM logic, the mother's perception of their closeness and perceptions of closeness between other dyads) would provide the therapist with a complex gestalt of interconnecting family dynamics and allow for a more informed systemic approach to clinical work with families of LGB persons.

Third, there is very little research that elucidates how adjustment plays out in real time following disclosure. Previous reviewers have pointed out both the ubiquitousness and limitations of retrospective methodologies in LGB research, noting that “the developmental psychology of the gay and lesbian life course is, in consequence, largely a psychology of the remembered past” (Boxer & Cohler, 1989, p. 325). In the studies we reviewed, though many used either current reports or a combination of current and retrospective reports, the current reports were used to assess variables such as well-being of the youth, disclosure status, or parents' current acceptance, while assessment of family characteristics (e.g., cohesion) was typically retrospective. Retrospective methods, combined with use of single respondents' reports to measure multiple variables, may be revealing only how the past is perceived by the respondent through the lens of the present. In addition, retrospective studies are much less rich in revealing the dynamics of family processes as they unfold over time and how these relate to the attitudes, identities, feelings, and well-being of family members. Savin-Williams and Dubé (1998) note that little research has addressed changes over time (which is still true, 10 years later); they group studies by those that examine “initial reactions” versus “current status” of the child–parent relationship. We are particularly interested in the “action” in between those two points in time, which can be fully studied only longitudinally. Prospective longitudinal studies such as the Add Health Study that contain a sufficiently large and nationally representative population of early adolescents to garner sufficient numbers of (as yet unidentified) gay youth and their families are key here. Ideally, such research would also follow the developmental trajectory of those processes into adulthood to examine how family processes in the high school/college age samples

relate to family dynamics with adult LGB offspring and their partners. Rothblum, Balsam, Solomon, and Factor (2005) found that, relative to their heterosexual siblings, lesbians live further from their families of origin and perceive less family support from them. Gay and heterosexual men, on the other hand, perceive the same amount of family support, and LGB couples, both lesbian and gay, have less contact with their families of origin than do heterosexual couples. It would be valuable to know what family factors predict these types of individual differences in adults' relationships with their families of origin.

Large-scale, long-term longitudinal studies are, however, difficult if not impossible for most researchers. A more realistic option is longitudinal research that begins at or shortly after disclosure in which family and individual functioning are studied for several years. Measures of family functioning can be gathered initially about both current and past functioning, providing a baseline for future assessments, and participants could be recruited broadly via ads in schools, community centers, and public spaces. All of the family studies and most of the dyadic studies recruited participants from LGB organizations or support groups (two of the latter also recruited more widely on college campuses), so it is unclear whether the results generalize beyond young people who are active in such groups. Again, information about family functioning should be gathered from all family members to permit true family-level variables to be assessed and studied in conjunction with measures of the LGB offspring's well-being.

One limitation of this strategy is that the timing of disclosure varies and does not always come early in the development of sexual orientation identity (Maugen et al., 2002); another is that parents (especially mothers) sometimes figure it out before their child discloses. In such cases, the process of family adjustment may well be ongoing, and therefore lost to the researcher, before disclosure/entry into the study. Another less powerful option, but still an improvement over a one-shot self-report strategy, is to ask participants to consider different and specific points in time in their recollections, as did Beals and Peplau (2006) and Ben-Ari (1995), who had parents recall the intensity of their reactions at 1 week, 1 month, and 6 months postdisclosure, and “currently.” Miller and Boon (2000) used an interesting strategy of having gay men plot the trust they had with their mothers over time and about several life events, including but not limited to disclosure. Though such measurement strategies are still subject to demand characteristics and to bias based on present states of mind, they at least introduce the element of time and, thus, some hints about the process of change. They also provide a more objective metric than asking global questions such as “Did your relationship with family members improve or decline following disclosure?”

Fourth, group means may mask important information about the nature of variability within groups and the factors that account for that variability. In the Beals and Peplau (2006) sample, for example, though the overall mean ratings of relationship quality with the mother were the same before disclosure and currently, this masked the fact that in 25% of cases it had improved, in 25% it had declined, and in 50%

it was unchanged. In the Miller and Boon (2000) study, the single most frequent pattern among disclosers was low and stable or declining levels of maternal trust in the time period preceding disclosure, contrary to Holtzen et al.'s (1995) assertion that disclosure represents "secure base" behavior for which strong attachment bonds are a prerequisite. Cross-sectional studies in which only means are treated lose information about within-group variability—information that could be analyzed more fully to help answer the question of why, even within a group that (on average) fared better than another group, there is still a range of outcomes.

Addressing these methodological concerns will help refine the knowledge that specific studies can supply. Beyond that, however, the findings of specific studies will then eventually need to be integrated and used in the context of a model of how positive outcomes develop. Below we provide such a preliminary model.

### A Preliminary Conceptual Model and Suggestions for Research

Because research on variables associated with family adjustments is just developing, it is impossible to create a complete or final model of the specific key variables and their interrelationships. Figure 1, however, offers a preliminary conceptual model to organize the few confirmed and many hypothetical relationships between individual-level and relationship-level variables in positive outcomes for future investigation.

Several features of the model need particular explanation. First, the model deemphasizes disclosure itself and the variables that predict it (youth self-acceptance of orientation, peer support, parent–youth relationship quality, youth's perceptions of family attitudes toward homosexuality, etc.), as these have been studied the most. Instead, the model begins at the first family-relevant set of variables that are operative postdisclosure: family members' initial reac-

tions. The model suggests that "family reaction" is not a singular variable but a complex of the mother's, father's, and sibling(s)' reactions. As the review suggests, there is good reason to suspect that gender and other characteristics of family roles (e.g., sibling loyalty) render individual family member's reactions different from each other and thus good reason that they should be assessed individually. At the same time, narrative and anecdotal accounts reveal that they clearly operate to influence each other, and the ways in which they do are in need of further study. Further, overarching individual/demographic variables such as religion and culture have been shown to be associated with initial reactions, and they are also associated with family interactions in general (e.g., culture is related to expressiveness).

Getting to the heart of the model, we also hypothesized that initial family reactions are influenced by preexisting family relationship variables, shown at the bottom of the model. Parents in a highly differentiated family, for example, will have different initial reactions from those in enmeshed families. Moreover, the bidirectional arrow suggests that the initial reactions also influence and help shape family relationships (e.g., an initial rejecting reaction by the father but accepting reaction by the mother may weaken family cohesion). Initial reactions give way to subsequent and evolving family interactions, denoted by the large box in the middle. It is in the ongoing family interactions themselves that the work of adjustment gets played out. These include both interactions that focus on the youth's sexual identity and behavior (see top of box) and general interactions about other family matters, such as house chores, recreation, homework, relatives' visits, sibling arguments, etc. (see bottom of box). The dotted line represents a boundary between these domains that may be more or less permeable across families. In some families, every interaction, at least for a time, may be related to the disclosure in one way or another, even when this does not involve the LGB

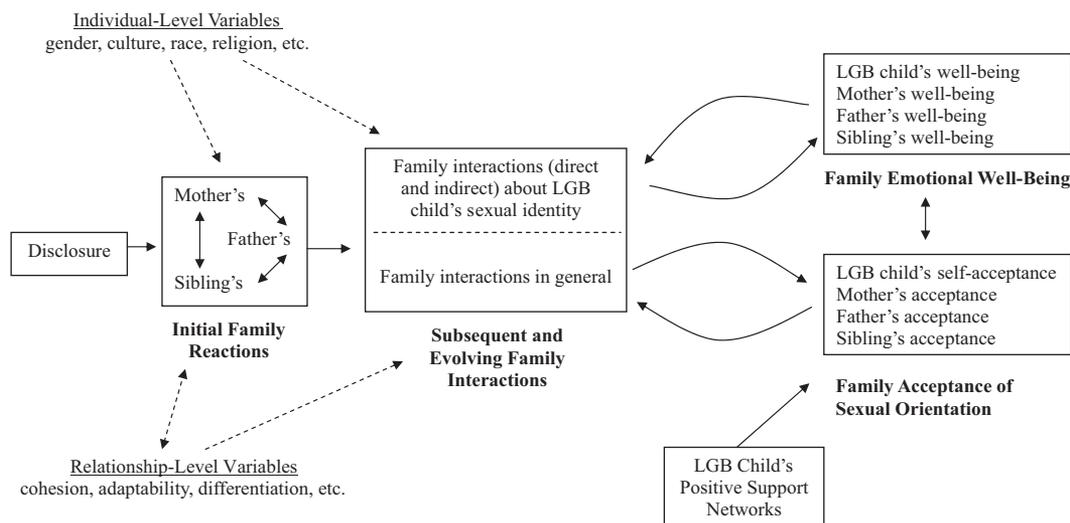


Figure 1. Preliminary conceptual model of adjustment to coming out.

family member directly (e.g., parent and sibling discussing the LGB person's sexual identity). In other families, very few of their general family interactions will concern the disclosure, though there may be occasional explicit discussions of it or occasional other interactions (e.g., planning relatives' visits) that acknowledge the issue of the young person's sexual identity. Here, family relationship variables become even more important because, as in families in general, relationship variables shape everyday interactions: Adaptable families have fewer arguments as adolescents seek autonomy, close families experience fewer long periods of silence following disagreements, families with healthy communication styles have fewer conversations characterized by mind reading, hostility, and criticism. In the process of family adjustment to coming out, relationship variables are just as important—if not more important—as they typically are in shaping the interactions by which family members (re)define themselves as both a “gay” and a healthy family.

Indeed, as previously articulated and as shown in the model on the far right, the most psychologically healthy adjustments include acceptance of both the LGB offspring's sexual identity and the emotional well-being of all family members (at least to predisclosure levels). Again, the model reflects the fact that family acceptance and family emotional well-being encompass individuals' standings on these variables—and that assessing LGB youths' mothers, fathers, and siblings separately on these two dimensions is important for research and clinical intervention. For example, a family in which acceptance is high only in the LGB youth but in no one else is less well adjusted than one in which all family members' acceptance is high; a family in which the father remains depressed and isolated because of his son's gay orientation is not as fully well adjusted as one in which both parents are high on emotional well-being. Further, the model suggests, as does the literature, that self- and other-acceptance affect each other; likewise, we suggest that the emotional well-being of individuals in families affects other family members' emotional well-being as well. The inclusion of parents' mental/emotional health in the model is new, to our knowledge, and is based on much discussion in the literature, both empirical and anecdotal, of LGB children's strong sensitivity to and concerns about their parents, including not wanting to hurt or disappoint them, worrying about parents' relationships with their social and extended family networks once the family is “out,” etc. We suggest, therefore, that a fully positive adjustment requires parents' emotional adjustment. A parent's low mood or high stress is invariably communicated to the family and is likely to have reverberating effects on subsequent interactions and on the youth's emotional health.

Finally, as implied by the preceding discussion, there are bidirectional relationships between family interaction, well-being, and acceptance. For example, parents' initial or partial acceptance of their child's sexual identity seems to predict improved emotional well-being of the child, which in turn facilitates more rewarding family interactions that affirm and strengthen emotional bonds, which helps parents move even closer to stable acceptance of their child's sexual

identity. Thus, emotional well-being and acceptance are included within the model and are represented as recursively related to family interactions rather than as static or stable end points. And although it is difficult to represent in a two-dimensional model, family interactions that characterize a certain level of adjustment also shift and change over time in response to developmental life events (e.g., the daughter brings home her life partner, or an estranged and unaccepting father becomes seriously ill). Adaptable families may well manage such events better than would less adaptable families, beyond the effects of other variables.

More research is needed to specify which family relationship variables are particularly important and how. Several basic family characteristics known to be important in family functioning in general and common to family theories—including cohesion, expressiveness, adaptability, family structure/boundaries, differentiation, triangles, and coalitions (Beavers & Hampson, 2003; Olson & Gorall, 2003; Walsh, 2003)—are obvious candidates for immediate study. DeVine (1984) argued that *cohesion* is a “critical systemic variable” (p. 10), predicting that disclosure will occur earlier in more cohesive families because keeping that information from each other engenders stress and discomfort for the LGB individual. Once LGB adolescents come out, cohesiveness is likely to affect parental reactions and subsequent adjustment, as is the family's level of *expressiveness*. To the extent that the family is used to sharing a wide range of feelings (Beavers & Hampson, 1990), this habit will facilitate working out whatever strong feelings each member may have during the coming out process, making members more likely to smoothly manage the disclosure and postdisclosure transition. There are, however, no empirical studies of these predictions. *Family adaptability* (a family's flexibility and ability to adjust its relationships and habits to change) is also known to be an important variable in healthy families and in good adjustment in young people, and it is known to be related to strong attachments (Pfaller, Kiselica, & Gerstein, 1998). Studies of whether these processes operate similarly in family and individual adjustments to coming out—in particular studies that test whether the models such as Pfaller et al.'s (1998) are equally predictive concerning gay and straight youth (including siblings)—would be instructive.

Further, family boundaries (Minuchin, 1974) and differentiation of self (Bowen, 1978; Bray, Williamson, & Malone, 1984, 1986; Kerr & Bowen, 1988) may be operative in family adjustment processes. DeVine (1984) articulated several testable, systemic hypotheses; for example, “in the family system where enmeshment and rigidity are present to a high degree disclosure by the gay man or lesbian may not take place for years unless forced from outside of the system,” and “[in chaotic and disengaged systems] interaction with the family system is not stressful because members in the family configuration do not connect with each other in an appreciable degree of affect or expectation. The focal member can easily lead a double existence” (p. 12). Though these are consistent with research that documents how some adult LGB individuals choose coping strategies of distance/avoidance from their families of origin (Roth-

blum et al., 2005), these also have yet to be tested with LGB young people as the process of family adjustment unfolds in real time. Research reviewed earlier as well as more general developmental research (cf. Mattanah, Hancock, & Brand, 2004, on adjustment to college) suggests that separation–individuation mediates the relationship between attachment and well-being as young people separate physically from their parents. Anxiety, guilt, and expectations of rejection upon separation are associated with troubled pre-separation relationships; whether these factors work in the same ways when sexual orientation is a family issue is an open question. This raises another as-yet unstudied question about the joint processes of “coming out” and “going away.” What role does physical separation (e.g., going away to college, moving away from home for work) play in the overall adjustment process? Does the timing of disclosure relative to a physical separation make a difference in family dynamics and adjustment? Also, theory and research findings on differentiation of self (an internalized balance of family relationships characterized by both connection and autonomy; Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988) in adolescent adjustment may be usefully brought to bear on LGB family research.<sup>5</sup>

The *dynamics of triangles and other coalitions* and the role of subsystem (e.g., sibling, marital) dynamics are also likely to be important. As noted earlier, family members’ adjustments are not always on the same schedule or trajectory, which may engender dynamics similar to those in other family issues that are a source of disagreement. Again, gender and family role are relevant in such dynamics: Vuchinich, Emery, and Cassidy (1988) found, for example, that in routine dyadic family conflicts during dinner, third-party participation was common and characterized by fathers using authority, mothers using mediation, and siblings using distraction, and they found that these strategies influenced both the patterning and the outcome of the conflict. A study of adult lesbians’ perceptions of family-of-origin dynamics (Kahn, 1991) found a significant positive correlation between (recalled) intimidation and triangulation between the respondent and her parents and found that lower levels of both of these family variables were correlated with higher stages of identity development. When an LGB youth discloses to a sibling before the parents, this may put the sibling in the uncomfortable position of shouldering a secret that is not his/her own and may result in strained bonds with other family members but deeper sibling bonds (Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996). Little is known about how coming out and subsequent processes are related to preexisting sibling subsystem dynamics (e.g., sibling rivalry or family roles such as “the good child” or “the troublemaker”). Likewise, we need to know more about the role of marital subsystem dynamics: whether marital quality helps a less accepting spouse to move more smoothly or more quickly toward acceptance; what strategies (reason, education, threats, appeals to family bonds, intervening in a private vs. a public manner) work best to resolve disagreements between parents about how to respond; etc. Further, the research and clinical literature suggests that one particular extrafamily factor—peer support (e.g., involvement in LGB youth

groups, PFLAG, etc.)—makes a difference in young people’s and their parents’ adjustments, especially in acceptance, thus warranting the inclusion of this variable in the model (Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001).

Finally, continued research is needed on how exactly culture, gender, and other demographic and individual difference variables influence adjustment via their effects on family interactions rather than simply a focus on how they predict disclosure. This review also highlights the need for more research in general on gender of the offspring and parent(s), including analyses that fully test gender as a moderator of the links between variables in the model, and the need for more research on type of sexual orientation. Although all but one of the relationship studies reviewed included both male and female participants, just half of them (and none of the family studies) treated gender as a variable in the analyses. The findings of those that did (all the studies involving parent–youth relationships), as well as the findings from individual-level studies, provide strong indications that gender is a significant factor. Further, only two of the dyadic and family studies included bisexual participants, and those two studies did not treat sexual orientation as a variable. Moreover, no studies included transgender participants. The specific sexual orientation disclosed may affect how these processes unfold; eventually somewhat different models will need to be refined for different groups. Moreover, experts in LGB psychology have recently made compelling arguments that challenge the stability of self-labeling LGB identities over time (Diamond, 2005, 2007) and that question unexamined and inconsistent research definitions of homosexuality based on attraction versus behavior versus identity (Savin-Williams, 2006). Our review, and indeed most of the literature, focuses on stable nonheterosexuality; by disclosure, we mean a message to parents of, essentially, “I’m not straight,” in some form or another. It will be important for future research to examine whether, in fact, the form(s) and stability of that identity and corresponding messages (e.g., “I like other girls” vs. “I used to like other girls only, but now I date boys too”) makes a difference in adjustment processes.<sup>6</sup>

In the meantime, this model is offered as a starting point for such research. Some variables may drop out, others may be added, and the directions of arrows may be altered as future research elucidates the specific processes of positive adjustments to coming out within the family. Ideally, a refined model (or models) can in turn be used to help guide more directed, systems-oriented clinical and educational interventions for LGB young people and their families.

<sup>5</sup> Differentiation of self is also relevant to adult adjustments and LGB couple relationships. Though that literature is beyond the scope of the present article, we acknowledge that the process of adjustment sometimes takes years.

<sup>6</sup> We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this point.

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