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Youth Disclosure of Sexual Orientation to Siblings and Extended Family

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Abstract

Objective—To explore the processes and experiences associated with disclosing sexual orientation to siblings and extended family.

Background—Few studies prioritize the experience of disclosing to siblings and extended family, despite its frequency and potential impact on the family unit. Extended family members often act as sources of support for youth; it is therefore worthwhile to consider whether this remains true during and after disclosure of sexual orientation.

Method—Interview and questionnaire data were gathered from 22 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) youth, 14 to 21 years of age, from a large Midwestern city. Constructivist grounded theory informed the qualitative methodology and data analysis. We build on concepts of horizontal and vertical family relationships by also introducing the concept of diagonal relationships.

Results—Participants described their relationships with aunts as possessing characteristics of horizontal and vertical relationships, allowing them to act as moderators and mediators of the parent–child relationship.

Conclusion—The concepts of vertical, horizontal, and diagonal relationships take into consideration how the structure (e.g., hierarchy, egalitarianism, boundaries) and nature (e.g., closeness, reciprocity, mentorship) of various relationships shape the coming-out process for LGBQ youth, without dismissing the importance of either immediate or extended family members.

Implications—The emerging conceptualization can guide services and interventions as well as illuminate further research on the family systems of LGBQ youth.

Keywords

Aunts; disclosure; family; LGBQ; qualitative methods; sexual minority youth; siblings

Some scholars conceptualize disclosure as the process of revealing information about oneself to another. More specifically, disclosure often occurs at a specific moment in time through various means, such as conversation or writing a letter. However, its impacts can unfold over the course of many months and even years (Denes & Afifi, 2014; Orne, 2011). Disclosure is a key component of relationships whereby individuals exhibit vulnerability, and vulnerability can bring family members together (Finkenauer, Engels, Branje, & Meeus, 2004). Accordingly, it makes sense that disclosure predicts greater intimacy and closeness (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998; Rubin, Hill, Peplau, & Dunkel-Schetter, 1980), as well as relationship satisfaction (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993).

However, literature on disclosing a lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) sexual orientation deviates from the aforementioned assertion. Indeed, the impact of disclosure on the individual and family members reveals that there are social, emotional, and psychological dynamics (e.g., internalized guilt and shame, risk of rejection, heteronormativity) that distinguish disclosing sexual orientation from other forms of disclosure. Specifically, disclosure of an LGBQ identity may result in severed family relationships or poor health (see Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009). Therefore, it is important to examine the process of disclosing sexual orientation to better understand its differences and commonalities with other general disclosures. Revealing a minority sexual or gender orientation identity, colloquially known as *coming out*, is a form of disclosure. For the purposes of this study, we focus on the process of coming out as LGBQ to avoid conflating transgender identity with sexual orientation. Further, disclosing gender identity can involve particular aspects that merit a study of its own to fully attend to these nuances.

In addition to examining the LGBQ disclosure process, the present study explores disclosure patterns in entire families and across different types of family relationships. Limited research addresses the relational aspects that shape disclosure patterns within entire families, such as reciprocity and generational boundaries (Finkenauer et al., 2004). Finkenauer and colleagues (2004) suggest that the disclosure process is situated in horizontal relationships (e.g., sibling, cousin–cousin) and vertical relationships (e.g., parent–child). Horizontal relationships are marked by reciprocity and egalitarianism, and vertical relationships involve guidance, boundaries, and hierarchy. We seek to examine the process of disclosing LGBQ sexual orientation in families in the present study by using the concepts of *vertical* and *horizontal* relationships and presenting the emerging concept of *diagonal* relationships. These three concepts have never been applied to LGBQ disclosure. Thus, this provides different insights that account for the importance of relational process and the nuances of disclosing sexual orientation within whole families. It can attend to different types of family relationships (e.g., siblings, aunts, cousins) that may be overlooked.

In this article, we attempt to extend the literature on the families of LGBQ youth by exploring the process and experience of disclosing a nonheterosexual orientation to siblings and extended family members from the perspective of the LGBQ youth. We fill a gap in the

literature with this study by (a) examining the relevancy of the horizontal and vertical concepts in research on LGBQ individuals and (b) making visible the impact that disclosure has on sibling and extended family relationships. The following research question guided the study: How do the concepts of vertical and horizontal relationships apply to sibling and extended family relationships in the context of disclosing an LGBQ identity?

Conceptual Framework

The concepts of vertical and horizontal relationships act as the guiding framework for the present study. Previous studies demonstrate the applicability of these concepts to understand family communication and relational patterns (e.g., Buhrmester & Prager, 1995; Finkenauer et al., 2004). For example, mutual disclosure was more common in horizontal family relationships such as siblings. Further, Finkenauer and colleagues (2004) extended the use of these concepts to the study of family disclosure, which also informed the present study. Compared with vertical relationships, horizontal relationships are considered more equal and less hierarchical, and individuals in horizontal relationships would tend to feel closer and more on par with one another. These relationships embody a pattern of mutual disclosure and equal status. Examples of this include parent–parent relationships and sibling relationships, which are horizontal due to their high sense of closeness, intimacy, and feelings of equality. Vertical relationships (e.g., parent–child) are characterized by boundaries; implicit rules concerning obedience, respect, and authority; some degree of unidirectional dependency (e.g., children); and some degree of unilateral power and responsibility by those on whom the dependency is placed (e.g., parents).

Heatherington and Lavner (2008) proposed a preliminary model that conceptualizes *family reaction* as involving sibling(s)' reactions to the disclosure of sexual orientation, in addition to parental reactions. They posited that family roles, sibling loyalty, triangles, coalitions, and parent–sibling discussions about the LGBQ youth's sexual orientation are likely to be important. This conceptualization allows for an understanding of a more integrated experience for the youth, where these reactions are ongoing and not necessarily exclusive of each other.

Disclosure

Disclosure to Parents

Studies concerning a parent's reactions to her or his child's disclosure of a nonheterosexual orientation have pointed toward myriad experiences and responses, making it difficult to present a dominant narrative. Conceptual factors such as family functioning (Goodrich & Gilbride, 2010), life span and developmental stages (Hunter, 2007), and differentiation of self (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; LaSala, 2000) may influence the coming-out narrative. Early research suggested that parental reactions often include shock, disbelief, sadness, and rejection and sometimes lead to acceptance (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003; Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006).

More recent research has incorporated a strengths-based and resiliency perspective that departs from the previous victim-centered narratives to view disclosure as a potential

pathway by which LGBQ youth can receive strength and support (Gonzalez, Rostosky, Odom, & Riggle, 2013; Grafsky, 2014; Needham & Austin, 2010; Rothman, Sullivan, Keyes, & Boehmer, 2012; Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010). This does not mean that coming out to parents has become an easy or cavalier decision—coming out marks a turning point that can have a profound impact on family life for LGBQ adolescents who disclose this identity to their parents. Grafsky (2017) identified a number of factors that influenced the decision to disclose or not to disclose to parents, including the existing relationship between the child and the parent and expectations of how the parent might respond. It is not uncommon that the parents of LGBQ adolescents experience fear and stress over the well-being of their child (Arm, Horne, & Levitt, 2009; Baptist & Allen, 2008), and a negative reaction by parents may trigger depression and anxiety in the child (Ryan et al., 2009).

Disclosure to the Rest of the Family

In a review of scholarship on LGBQ families, Biblarz and Savci (2010) did not find any studies on nonparental family relationships (e.g., siblings, cousins, aunts). The scarce existing samples that do include nonparental family members reveal that siblings are important in the lives of LGBQ youth; the sibling relationship is often described as positive and supportive (Hilton & Szymanski, 2011; Jenkins, 2008). One study found that 38% of gay men and lesbians reported disclosing to a sibling before any other family member (Savin-Williams, 2001). Similarly, another study found that 63% of gay men and lesbians sampled had come out to their siblings, and 60% of those who had done so rated their siblings as supportive and accepting of their sexual orientation (Beals & Peplau, 2008). In a study that examined 56 LGBT youths' perceptions of their sibling relationships, Toomey and Richardson (2009) found that participants were most likely to disclose to their mothers and second most likely to disclose to a sibling. Yet another study found that few LGBQ youth reported negative reactions from siblings following disclosure, but when negative reactions did occur, they were more likely to come from male than female siblings (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Stark, 2008). Consistent with the quantitative studies, qualitative explorations of sibling experiences with the disclosure process have found that most siblings described feeling emotionally closer to their sibling following the disclosure experience (Hilton & Szymanski, 2011; Jenkins, 2008). Taken together, these findings highlight the salience of siblings for helping LGBQ youth maintain positive and supportive family relationships after disclosure. Indeed, given the literature's conceptualization of LGBQ youth as a vulnerable population (Saewyc, 2011), exploring sibling relationships may uncover an untapped source of support.

Although anecdotal reports suggest that family members have considerable difficulty telling others about the LGBQ individual's identity (D'Augelli, 2006; Herdt & Koff, 2000), little research has focused on disclosure to additional family members such as grandparents and other extended family. Age is sometimes used as a reason to defer coming out to grandparents (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003). Individual-level factors (e.g., gender, race, culture, religion) and relationship-level variables (e.g., cohesion, adaptability, differentiation) are associated with the initial family reactions (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008). LGBQ youth are identified as a high-risk population due their high rates of suicide,

bully victimization, and substance abuse (Brewster & Tillman, 2012; Russell, 2002), as well as experiences of discrimination and the lack of sufficient resources in school for addressing these issues (Watson & Miller, 2012). As previously noted, family support is invaluable for developing a strong network of support and care in the lives of LGBQ youth (Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2013). Siblings and extended family members have the potential to strengthen existing family systems and attenuate the circumstances that render LGBQ youth vulnerable. By using the concepts of vertical and horizontal family relationships, we examine how disclosure of sexual orientation to siblings and extended family members can further illuminate research on the family systems of LGBQ youth.

Method

Participants

Sampling and recruitment—Purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990) was employed as participants were recruited through advertising via local LGBQ youth-serving organizations and local pride events in a Midwestern state within the United States. Recruitment materials were also distributed around the local university campus, shops, and stores. Potential participants who responded to these recruitment efforts (by contacting the principal investigator via e-mail) were screened to determine whether they met the eligibility criteria for participation. Inclusion criteria required the ability to speak and understand English due to the verbal nature of participation and the importance of language in meaning-making (Mosher, 2001). Youth between 14 and 21 years of age who identified as nonheterosexual were eligible to participate, capturing a common age range for adolescents and emerging adults to initially disclose to parents. However, disclosure to family was not a criterion for eligibility. To avoid conflating gender identity with sexual orientation, transgender identified individuals were not recruited. Once eligibility was determined, participants were asked to review and sign an informed consent form. Youth under 18 years of age were also required to provide either (a) parental/guardian consent or (b) assent with the presence of a third-party advocate. Participants each received a \$25 retail gift card as compensation for their time.

Characteristics of the sample—The perspectives of 22 youth (12 males, 10 females) between the ages of 14 and 21 ($M = 18.9$; $SD = 1.7$) were included in the study. Most identified as non-Hispanic White (86.4%), and one youth each identified as Latino (4.5%), Black (4.5%), or biracial (4.5%). Nine youth identified as gay men (40.9%), one as lesbian (4.5%), eight as bisexual (40.9%; six females, three males), two as queer (9.1%; both female), and one as pansexual (4.5%; female). Many of the youth in the sample were raised in two-parent homes and reported data on two parental figures ($n = 17$). Specific socioeconomic data were not collected.

Data Collection Procedure

Two methods of data collection were employed: questionnaires and individual interviews. The lead author conducted all data collection for this study in a private research space. The questionnaires focused on demographic and biographical information in an unobtrusive and time-efficient manner. Near the beginning of the interview, participants were asked to

identify up to six important family members. During this process, the interviewer recorded the relationship (e.g., grandma), whether the family member was aware of the participant's nonheterosexual orientation, and whether the participant's orientation was disclosed by choice or due to being outed (i.e., due to someone else revealing their orientation without the participant's permission) and, if so, by whom. This information was then used by the interviewer to discuss the decision to disclose or not to disclose to each of these family members throughout the interview. Further, it was common for additional extended family members not previously identified at the beginning to emerge in conversation and be discussed during the interview. Interviews lasted a mean of 64 minutes, were audio recorded, and were transcribed by the first author or one of two trained undergraduate students. A second person then checked the transcriptions for accuracy and to ensure identifying information was removed.

Analytical Procedure

Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) guided the interpretive, team data analysis employed for this project. The team comprised a female faculty member, two female graduate students, and a male upper-level undergraduate student who, as a group, represented multiple sexual orientations. The lead author developed a three-part data analysis plan that involved analytic memoing from the other three team members throughout all three phases. In the first phase, the quantitative data gathered from the demographic questionnaire were copied into a spreadsheet; these data helped the research team map out the participants' family relationships and provide an overview of the family members to whom participants had disclosed. Qualitative data were stored in the form of transcripts in word processor documents.

An initial coding scheme, informed by the theoretical framework guiding our study, was designed to selectively code relevant data that could guide further analysis. This scheme involved identifying aspects of the interviews where youth were (a) describing their relationship with particular family members, (b) describing their decision process to disclose to particular family members, and (c) highlighting positive and negative experiences associated with their disclosure experiences. The second and third authors analyzed all transcripts for these three categories of data. Next, all team members identified recurrent concepts through the use of open and selective coding to develop themes. During the third phase of analysis, the research team engaged in team coding to discuss and elaborate on the emerging themes and refine the coding structure for each theme using the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2000). This iterative research process resulted in focused coding categories.

Peer debriefing was used to guard against researcher bias and provide additional validity to the results of this analysis. We openly discussed our biases to expand our awareness and thus generated openness and space to seek confidential support and serve as each other's critical readers (Padgett, 1998). Additional analytic strategies employed in the third phase of analysis included considering representativeness, weighing the evidence, identifying and considering negative evidence, and obtaining consensus (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The final step involved deciding how the results should be presented to most accurately reflect

the results of the analysis. The researchers maintained an audit trail and tracked any ideas and changes during the study to ensure a clear understanding of how the analysis evolved. We used multiple forms of data collection (questionnaires and interviews) and multiple investigators, which enabled us to apply different means of triangulation to enhance the rigor of the analysis.

Results

Findings from the first phase of analyses provided a descriptive overview of the data. The 22 participants reported 136 family relationships, 98 of which were not the participant's parent. Table 1 provides a summary of these relationships. Approximately 63% of all identified family members were aware of the youth's sexual orientation. This percentage was slightly higher (76.3%) among participants' primary parents and slightly lower (58.2%) among their family members who were not one of their primary parents. Among this sample, full biological siblings were most likely to be aware of the participants' sexual orientation (84.0%), followed by mothers (81.0%). More than 70% of identified aunts were aware. Youth were most likely to personally disclose to their parents (82.8%) and biological siblings (61.9%).

In what follows, we describe the experience of disclosing to siblings and situate that experience within the concept of nuclear family relationships versus extended family relationships. In doing so, we describe the influence of horizontal versus vertical family relationships. Next, we introduce the concept of diagonal family relationships that emerged from our analysis, emphasizing the unique characteristics of aunts. Finally, we discuss how stepfamily members may share elements of vertical, horizontal, and diagonal family relationships. Figure 1 portrays the important vertical, horizontal, and diagonal family relationships identified by our participants. These relationships can be characterized by different angles relative to horizontal and vertical (indicating family roles and attitudes) and proximities (indicating intimacy). For example, sibling relationships were characterized by a high degree of intimacy and horizontality, whereas grandparents tended to be more distant geographically or emotionally and possessed a more authoritative family role. As we report the results, each participant quoted is identified by a unique participant number, gender (as indicated by M for *male* or F for *female*), and age in years (e.g., "P02, M, 19" indicates Participant 02, who was a 19-year-old male).

Sibling Disclosure and Horizontal Family Relationships

Sibling relationships were salient for the participants in this study, who revealed feelings of anxiety, obligation, loyalty, and closeness when disclosing to siblings. One expressed his fear of rejection from his brother: "I was afraid that he would reject me, I guess. I couldn't have that. That would have been devastating" (P04, M, 20). It was clear the sibling relationship was meaningful to this participant and that his brother's reaction wielded a strong emotional impact. Yet participants also described the positive effects that siblings could have in the disclosure process, as exemplified by this experience: "We write each other notes sometimes and put them under each other's doors. I still have it, she wrote me one, like, 'I'll support you no matter what, I respect you,' and stuff like that" (P02, M, 19). As

this quote reveals, when siblings are supportive, the process of coming out can actually bring them closer.

Participants largely perceived their siblings as equals, reflecting the concept of horizontal relationships, which are characterized by a sense of equality and potential for closeness and intimacy: “We talked like equals and treated each other like equals” (P03, M, 20). More equality and less power differential may contribute to more openness after disclosure: “Just kind of an openness, I guess, we could talk about it some more; be more myself and she could view me, more genuinely” (P02, M, 19). In another example, substantial bonding, love, and a mutual connection was described: “Oh yeah, there’s a bond. I think about her every day, and I know she thinks about me. And I know my sister misses me. I miss her a lot” (P12, F, 21). Our findings on disclosure to siblings support the current literature (Hilton & Szymanski, 2011) in how genuine support and intimacy between siblings can ease the emotional difficulties in the decision-making process of disclosing sexual orientation.

Disclosure to Nuclear Versus Extended Family Members

Participants did not convey a sense of urgency to disclose to extended family members. The amalgamation of available time, the considerable number of individuals to disclose to, as well as geographic separation between some family members attenuated feelings of necessity and obligation. “We’re very cloistered. We do stay separate from our extended family” (P08, M, 21). This example highlighted how the level of separateness between the nuclear and extended family shaped the decision to disclose. Proximity and location inevitably affect the family structure and amount of contact. This may help explain why some extended family members (such as cousins) were not discussed in detail. In this sample, there was more variability in the importance of disclosing to extended family members than to immediate family members: “They’re not my immediate family. I mean, they are my next closest family after my mom, my brothers . . . but I just think it isn’t nearly as important to me that they know that part of my life” (P05, F, 19).

Others considered the impact of disclosing to their extended family, and even how it might influence the extended family’s relationship with their immediate family. Disclosure to extended family included deliberate, intentional decisions. Disclosure to extended family members also could be cyclical, repeated, and continual, particularly for those who had a considerable number of uncles, aunts, cousins, and grandparents, and even more so for those in blended families. Disclosure could occur over the course of several years, further elongating the feelings of unease and incongruence with identity: “Before [disclosing], I felt like there was always this kind of elephant in the room, cause I didn’t really know how to be myself around them” (P15, F, 18).

Disclosure to extended family was experienced as a nonlinear and ongoing process for many in this sample. Further, it is important to note that disclosure gains and risks varied for different extended family members:

Out of my distant family, the only person I told was my aunt, my mom’s sister, who’s like my closest aunt . . . she has like, 8 siblings. My dad’s side are all stuck-

up type people, so I didn't know how they would react to it. But, I just never really felt like it was needed, to say it to them. (P22, M, 16)

For this participant, his aunt was the only relationship where disclosure was intentional and deliberate. His relationships with the remaining extended family members on his dad's side were less amiable, and, by extension, he felt less of a need to invite them into that part of his life.

Grandparent Disclosure and Vertical Family Relationships

Recognizing how decisions to disclose to extended family also fluctuated based on the particular members, we examined specific extended family members, including grandparents, aunts, and stepfamily members. Unlike sibling relationships, which often were characterized by a sense of closeness and equality, the grandparent relationships described by participants in the sample were classified as vertical relationships. Grandparent–grandchild relationships tend to be marked by authority, responsibility, and power, similar to parent–child relationships. The data suggest that the youth in our sample tended to feel that there was more at stake in deciding to disclose to their grandparents than other extended family members: “I am afraid of how they would respond. I don't know how my grandparents would respond to that” (P04, M, 20). Another participant who remained conflicted about not having disclosed to his grandmother described: “It was kind of selfish in a way because I wanted to have that last moment with her. I didn't want my last memories of her to be her hating me” (P07, M, 18).

The importance of the grandparent–grandchild relationship in the lives of the youth played a large role in how the decision-making process was experienced: “I kind of like being able to talk to her every day and stuff. So I mean, she's my grandma and I love her, so I really don't want [disclosure] to affect that or anything” (P04, M, 20). For some, a grandparent's age was a factor in choosing to not disclose: “My grandma's 60 [years of age, so] I'm not gonna bring that stuff up. You know, it's just weird” (P17, F, 20). Further, the age gap affected participants' ease speaking with their grandparents about sexuality, as well their perception of the necessity of disclosure: “Not to sound really morbid or anything, but we don't expect her to live that much longer, and I just feel like we don't really have much to gain by telling her” (P02, M, 19). From this response, we speculated that in situations when aging and health issues are present, youth might not want to disclose to protect their grandparent from the unnecessary challenges that processing that information may present for the grandparent or for the status quo of the relationship and family relations more generally. There was also fear of prejudice: “My grandmother's very [racially] prejudiced, too, and so I thought if she hasn't had time to get over that obstacle, how is she gonna have time to accept me when that's even a step further” (P07, M, 18). In other cases, having a grandparent's support after disclosure was meaningful. For example, one youth shared:

My Grandma is on Facebook, this isn't like a big thing but, there's a post that was going around that said 'If you know someone in your life that is gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, put this as your status' [Grandma posted it]. So, it wasn't big, but it made me happy that she's there for me. (P21, F, 14)

Thus, unlike the equality observed with siblings, we observed the reoccurring themes of respect, protection, and responsibility in these vertical grandparent–grandchild relationships.

Aunts and Diagonal Family Relationships

Half of the youth in our sample mentioned the support and companionship received from an aunt as part of their experience disclosing to family members. Some extended family members did not fit into our emerging conceptualization of horizontal and vertical relationships. Therefore, we posited that the relationships between the participant and some extended family members, aunts in particular, are best conceptualized as diagonal relationships. Participants often described aunts as emotionally close, as in a horizontal relationship, yet possessed certain degrees of authority given their age and role in the family, as in a vertical relationship. For instance, one youth described a close, uniqueness in the relationship with her aunt: “There’s just been something about her; I’ve always had a very close relationship with her” (P05, F, 19).” Another youth conceded: “I’m actually pretty close to my dad’s sister, who knows a lot about my life” (P12, F, 21).

With the closeness, however, was an added feature of mediating and counseling that these extended family members fulfilled. In fact, many adult nonparental family members took on the role of mediators within the family and offered advice on the best ways to disclose to parents, as with this participant who experienced suicidal ideation tied to his sexual orientation:

When there was a problem with my mom and [me], I go to [my aunt] and then she goes and mediates for us. . . . She was the first person I told about my suicide thoughts and so she was able to tell my mom that ‘cause I couldn’t tell her myself, so she’s kind of like the mediator for us. (P05, F, 19)

Aunts were sometimes disclosed to before telling parents and were the most commonly referenced sources of advice or guidance in terms of LGBQ youths’ decisions to disclose to other family members: “I told my aunt, and she never like, she was cool with it and everything” (P22, M, 16). Further, the following illustrates how another participant’s aunt, who identified as lesbian, acted as a source of comfort and closeness:

I was mostly upset because I knew that my best friend would never wanna be with me, and so she was trying to console me for that, instead of for identifying as lesbian. . . . She’s always been really good at putting things in perspective, like when I have relationship trouble, she’s always the first person I go to because she gets it. (P10, F, 19)

Although diagonal relationships might differ in the degree of obligation and closeness and vary based on the nature of their relationship with the extended family member, they represent a unique position in which the family member could serve as mediators, mentors, and allies in the youth’s self-disclosure process. These youth disclosed in diagonal relationships before others for advice and mentorship, simultaneous to others for support or instead of others in cases where support was not anticipated within the nuclear family.

Stepfamily Members Disclosure and Relationships

On the basis of our data, we classified stepsiblings as horizontal relationships and stepparents as diagonal relationships that were further in proximity to the youth than biological siblings and parents. Specifically, with regard to the diagonal classification of stepparents, they held some level of authority, but often less than that of the parent, and closeness varied based on the integration of the stepparent into the family and the youth's life.

Most of the youth in our sample described more distant relationships with their stepfamily members. One youth stated that even though she was legally adopted by her stepmom, there was a lack of closeness: "She's not my [mom]; she's not even a friend" (P12, F, 21). Another noted that although there were no explicit negative responses about her sexual orientation, her stepmom avoided talking about things that may bring up her queerness (e.g., dating): "My identity is not necessarily the topic of conversation [with my stepmom] because everything I'm involved in is so queer" (P13, F, 19). This implicit discomfort with discussing queer things strained the relationship with her stepmom and their capacity to grow closer.

The discomfort and distance described by those participants with their stepparents was not always the case. We also found that the degree of a stepfamily member's involvement, motivation to bond with the youth, and openness to their sexual orientation could shift the angle and proximity of the diagonal relationships within stepparent–stepchild and stepsibling relationships. One participant detailed a good relationship with her stepdad. She stated that she did not personally disclose her sexual orientation to him, but she suspected that he already knew. She also reported that her stepdad was supportive of her sexual orientation: "He's not like, whatever go do your own thing I don't care. He's like, okay that's fine, I'm here if you need me, if you need to talk then talk to me" (P21, F, 14). Stepparents shared with aunts the commonality of diagonal relationships, which were marked by a combination of both authority and equality (see Figure 2). However, their proximity and closeness to the youth might need to be proactively negotiated, whereas diagonal relationships with extended family members (like aunts) were more likely to be accepted without little negotiation.

Similarly, closeness to stepsiblings influenced the disclosure process for some participants. "I'd tell [my stepbrother] if we got closer" (P21, F, 14). One youth's decision not to disclose to a stepbrother was more related to her concern that the stepbrother's autism may inhibit his ability to understand. In another instance, a youth considered her stepsiblings to be part of the immediate family. This suggests that perception of stepfamily members as a part of the family might also be an important factor in the nature of the stepsibling relationship, and thus, in the decision of whether to disclose sexual orientation.

Discussion

Our results demonstrate how the LGBTQ youth–aunt relationships resembled the egalitarian closeness of siblings in that they were able to provide comfort and intimacy, but aunts differed from siblings in their ability to mentor, mediate, and serve as both insiders and

outsiders in the family system. To our knowledge, the concept of diagonal relationships has not been applied to describe relationships between an individual and their extended family members. This conceptualization helped us understand how LGBQ youth carried out and made sense of their disclosure process to family members.

Parallel to our understanding of the relationships between LGBQ youth and their extended family members, Milardo (2009) examined the relationships and communication between aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews. He described elements of obligation and closeness in these kinships and the organization of families by households. The households in which families are organized may partially explain the unique experience that extended family members have as both insiders and outsiders to the immediate family. For instance, aunts are viewed as having a third-party perspective and often mentor their nieces and nephews (Milardo, 2009). This makes sense in the context of disclosing sexual orientation where youth may want or need guidance concerning how best to disclose to parents and other family members. Aunts maintained enough emotional distance to be independent from the immediate family while simultaneously being sufficiently involved in family traditions, rituals, and storytelling to understand the unique family circumstances within which each youth disclosed. This enabled aunts, with their diagonal relationship, to influence the larger family context surrounding disclosure and contribute to a sense of ongoing family cohesiveness.

Our findings are also consistent with Ellingson and Sotirin's (2006) findings that aunts are often perceived as being more neutral, less prone to judge, and having less responsibility to impose family rules than parents. Consequently, LGBQ youth may feel more comfortable disclosing to their aunts, creating opportunities for aunts to mentor and guide LGBQ youth in their decision-making process. Further, LGBQ youth may choose to define fictive kin—that is, individuals who have neither consanguineal nor affinal ties but nonetheless play the role of extended family, often in diagonal relationship roles of godparents, aunts, and uncles. In this way, diagonal relationships may expand beyond kin related by blood or marriage by incorporating friends of the family (Weston, 1997).

The decision to disclose was not a simple task for most of the youth due to the many factors they needed to take into account, including the structure of their family and the relationships among family members. Fear of rejection from family members and a perceived lack of understanding and acceptance often influenced the disclosure decisions of the youth in this study. Variability also arose in the importance attributed to disclosure to extended family members; disclosure was highly related to how the youth perceived the importance of their relationship to the extended family member. These findings are congruent with D'Augelli's (2006) assertions that disclosure of sexual orientation to extended family members likely reflects both direct and indirect patterns of communication in the family as well as the sense of closeness between particular family members. As Orne (2011) found in his analysis of strategic outness, disclosure to siblings and extended family members is best understood as interactional and contextual.

The vertical, or authoritative, nature of the parental relationship was typically not present among other family members, with the exception of grandparents. It is not surprising that

youth often did not disclose to their grandparents when conceptualized within the concept of vertical relationships because the youth often considered not only their own relationships with their grandparent but how their grandparent(s) knowing may affect the relationship of their parent and grandparent. Siblings and cousins were perceived as more equal, although siblings were much more likely to be personally disclosed to and aware of the participant's nonheterosexual orientation. Stepsiblings were also horizontal relationships with differing degrees of closeness, based on how integrated the stepfamily is in the collective family identity. Stepparents were diagonal, which was reflected in the fact that they had varying levels of involvement and authority in youths' lives. They straddled elements of both nuclear families (such as living together) and extended family (limited authority in decision-making).

The saliency of family members (e.g., siblings, aunts, cousins) as allies arose acutely from the data set. Half of the participants mentioned the support and companionship received from an aunt. Nonparental family members took on the role of mediators within the family and offered precious advice on the best ways to disclose to parents. Furthermore, the support of extended family members sometimes buffered the distress experienced by parents during disclosure. The unique status of aunts, uncles, stepparents, and grandparents as both outsiders and insiders within the nuclear family allowed them the opportunity to offer personal and meaningful support to parents and youth. Siblings and extended family members can be a key resource for LGBQ youth in their disclosure process, as well as a source of social support throughout their lives. However, it is important to recognize that, like parents, siblings and extended family members can also be a source of stress for LGBQ youth (D'Augelli, 2006).

Current literature does not provide a rich understanding of how extended family members play a role in the disclosure process for LGBQ youth. Focusing on the nuclear family further reflects and maintains a culturally normative definition of family, whereas the queer family supports a fluid and inclusive way of constructing family. The nuclear family norm parallels with heteronormative standards that families must be composed of children and two heterosexual parents. Rather than limiting our focus to the nuclear family, the concepts of vertical, horizontal, and diagonal relationships take into consideration how the structure (e.g., hierarchy, egalitarianism, boundaries) and nature (e.g., closeness, reciprocity, mentorship) of various relationships shape the coming-out process for LGBQ youth, without dismissing the importance of either immediate or extended family members.

Limitations and Future Research

The present study focused on the experiences of LGBQ youth in a particular region of the United States and therefore may not be transferable to other geographic regions (rural, suburban, urban, etc.). Additionally, geographic proximity between LGBQ youth and their extended family members was not included in the data; proximity of youth and extended family members might be an important factor to consider. Further, participants under 18 years of age needed to obtain consent from an adult guardian to participate, and all but one had a parent provide consent. This may have excluded potential participants who did not

have an adult from whom they could comfortably request consent or who may have felt that participating would put them at risk of being outed.

Given the exploratory nature of the study, maternal/paternal lineage of aunts and other extended family members were not examined. Future research should explore how maternal/paternal lineages might contribute to the family context and the disclosure process. Future studies also could investigate the role of gender in sibling and extended family relationships of the LGBQ youth. In addition, researchers should explore more diverse LGBQ youth and families to understand how disclosure operates in extended family members of varying contexts. For instance, the majority of our participants grew up in two-parent headed households. More research is needed to determine the salience of horizontal, vertical, and diagonal relationships in diverse family systems.

Implications

Scholars, clinicians, and other helping professionals working with LGBQ youth should use a systemic and wider definition of family when working with LGBQ youth, particularly when looking for potential sources of support. Few evidence-based programs or interventions exist to assist LGBQ youth with the disclosure process (but for an exception, see Ryan's [n.d.] Family Acceptance Project). Our findings suggest that family service professionals should take care to assess and ask about LGBQ youth extended family members in addition to more immediate family members. The concept of horizontal, vertical, and diagonal relationships can be used to understand alliances within one's family. For instance, family service professionals can help the LGBQ youth establish a stronger relationship with supportive extended family members. They can explore how the LGBQ youth would decide who to talk with about dating, bullying, sexual exploration and safety, disclosure of sexual orientation in different settings, and other issues relevant to adolescence and emerging adulthood. In addition to parents, aunts (and other extended family members in diagonal relationships with whom the LGBQ youth feel support) can serve as a potential mentors. An LGBQ youth's alliance with a sibling will generate different resources and kinds of support than with an aunt or godparent. In short, we encourage practitioners and other helping professionals to think outside the proverbial nuclear-family box when working with LGBQ youth.

Acknowledgments

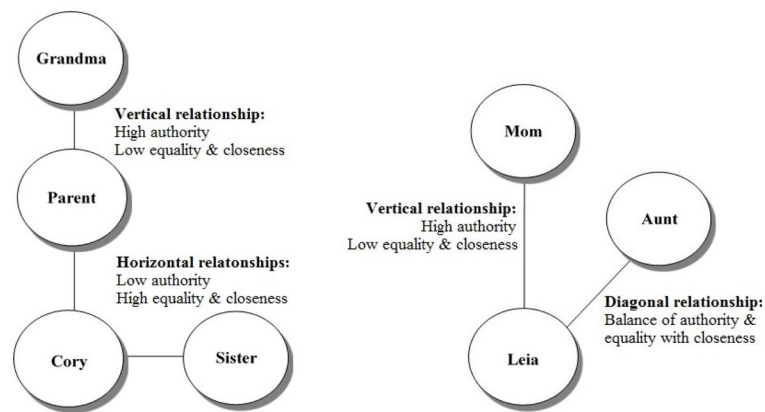
This project was partially supported by Award Number R36DA026958 from the National Institute on Drug Abuse. The content is solely the responsibility of the author and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institute on Drug Abuse or the National Institutes of Health. The authors thank the participants who shared their experiences for this project.

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**Cory:**

"[Grandma is] getting older and stuff. Not to sound really morbid or anything but . . . we don't expect her to live that much longer and I just feel like we don't really have much to gain by telling her."

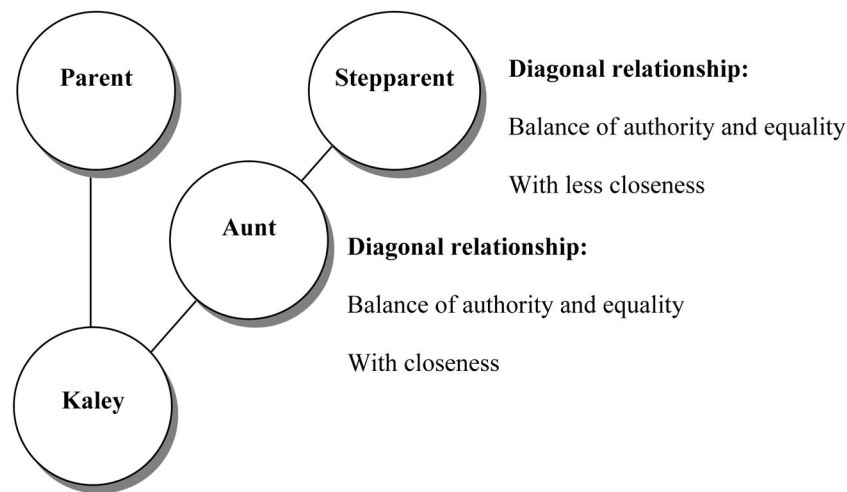
"[My sister and I] write each other notes sometimes and put them under each other's doors. I still have it, she wrote me one like, 'I'll support you no matter what, I respect you,' and stuff like that." (P02, M, 19)

Leia:

"I think because [my aunt] was literally the only person that knew other than myself, we had this unspoken bond that was really cool, but she didn't treat me differently or anything, speak to me any differently. But we definitely had this sort of secret thing going on. I would come over and wanna talk about it, but not wanna talk about it in front of her partner or not wanna talk about it in front of my mom. And so we would, you know find our own private space to be able to talk about it." (P09, F, 19)

Figure 1.

Vertical, horizontal, and diagonal relationships of LGBTQ youth.



Kaley: When asked about disclosure to stepmom, “Um, my stepmom, nothing. . . . My identity is not necessarily the topic of conversation because everything I’m involved in is so queer.” (P13, F, 19).

Figure 2.

Diagonal relationships between aunt and stepparent. Participants tended to report a lack of closeness with their stepparent (with a few exceptions), but given the limitations of our study and sample, the understanding of this diagonal relationship remains inconclusive. It may be that diagonal relationships with stepparents require more proactive, intentional effort to negotiate their closeness (than do diagonal relationships with aunts) and their authority (than vertical relationships with parents).

Table 1

Family Members of LGBTQ Youth

Family member	Aware		Intentional disclosure		
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
Parent	38	29	76.3	24	82.8
Mother	21	17	81.0	14	82.4
Father	17	12	70.6	10	83.3
Stepparent or nonactive parent	5	4	80.0	1	25.0
Biological mother	1	1	100.0	0	0.0
Stepmother	3	2	66.7	1	50.0
Stepfather	1	1	100.0	0	0.0
Sibling	43	26	60.5	16	61.5
Full biological sibling	25	21	84.0	13	61.9
Brother	14	12	85.7	7	58.3
Sister	11	8	72.7	6	75.0
Half-brother	7	3, 1 ^b	42.9	1	33.3
Half-sister	6	2, 2 ^b	33.3	2	100.0
Stepbrother	4	0	0.0	0	0.0
Stepsister	1	0	0.0	0	0.0
Grandparent	20	7	35.0	4	57.1
Grandfather	5	2	40.0	1	50.0
Grandmother	15	5	33.3	3	60.0
Aunt and uncle	14	10	71.4	7	70.0
Aunt	14	10, 1 ^b	71.4	7	70.0
Uncle	0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Cousin	7	2	28.6	2	100.0
Male cousin	4	1, 2 ^b	25.0	1	100.0
Female cousin	3	1, 1 ^b	33.3	1	100.0
Others ^a	9	8	88.9	6	75.0
Total family members	136	86	63.2	60	69.8

Family member	Intentional disclosure			
	Aware			
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Total of nonprimary parents	98	58.2	36	63.2

Note. LGBTQ = lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer.

^aIncludes great uncle, family member's fiancé, godmother and godfather, best friends, and exchange students.

^bLGBQ youth was unsure whether nonheterosexual orientation was known by the family member (these are not calculated into the percentage).