Coming Out And The Parent-child Relationship

Disclosing that one identifies with a sexual orientation other than heterosexual, also known as “coming out,” is often considered to be an important yet difficult part of identity development for sexual minorities (Martin & Hetrick, 1988). Coming out has at times been associated with better mental health outcomes (Legate et al., 2012), but it also carries with it certain stressors for the individual (D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Frost, Lehavot, & Meyer, 2013; Huebner, Rebchook, & Kegeles, 2004; Meyer, 2003). Rejection, whether actual or merely feared, can be very emotionally trying (Willoughby, Doty, & Malik, 2010). It is not uncommon for depression and anxiety to accompany a time of such extreme transition (McAndrew & Warne, 2010). In addition to these individual stressors, there are also many relational stressors. The way that a person responds to a friend or family member’s disclosure can have a large impact on the relationship (Oswald, 2000). All of this considered it comes as no surprise that coming out is a challenging milestone for same-sex-attracted youth (Martin, & Hetrick, 1988).

Furthermore, when an adolescent or young adult comes out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB), it can be a source of significant individual and family stress (Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006). In addition to the rejection the individual may face from the broader community, there is also the risk that they will experience discrimination and prejudices from their own family (Frost et al., 2013). For the family, it can be difficult to know how to respond, especially when they have not had such an experience before. Due to its potential impact, it is important to have a thorough understanding of the stressors that come along with disclosure of LGB identity and to consider what factors lead to resiliency. This paper will seek to explore these individual and family stressors, outlining how an adolescent or young adult coming out can affect the family system, and more specifically the parent-child relationship.

Individual Stressors of LGBT Identity

Ambiguity of Origin

Theorists have posited several different explanations for the origin of homosexuality. Stage Model theorists have claimed that homosexuality is primarily a biological phenomenon and that the individual passes through several stages toward accepting their true identity (***). Anything short of achieving that acceptance inhibits the individual's progress and generates cognitive distress (***). On the contrary, those who adopt a Social Constructionist viewpoint claim that individuals construct their sexual orientations as a result of their experiences (****). Presently, other researchers accept a more moderate view, allowing that biology does have some influence and that social experiences also play a role in sexual identity formation (****). These varying viewpoints can give LGB youth mixed messages on what they are feeling, and that ambiguity can result in a significant amount of stress (****).

Additionally, perceptions concerning the origins of homosexuality can impact the degree to which people accept LGB youth. When homosexuality is attributed to controllable causes it is viewed less favorably than when it is perceived to originate from uncontrollable causes such as biology (Willoughby, Doty, & Malik, 2008). Subsequently, when adults accept biological explanations for homosexuality, they are more likely to be supportive of gay rights as opposed

to those who view homosexuality as a choice (Wood, & Bartkowski, 2004). LGB individuals will likely feel a greater degree of support from people whose views more closely align with stage theorists.

Minority Stress

Mental Health

Minority stress theory is often used to explain the high rates of mental illness observed in the LGB community. The primary idea of this theory is that individuals in a minority group are subject to increased stigma, prejudice, and discrimination. The wide array of environmental stressors then leads to mental health problems (Meyer, 2003). Mental illness is significantly more prevalent among LGB individuals when compared to those with a heterosexual identity. Those who identify as homosexual show significantly higher rates of affective disorders, suicidality, and substance use (Meyer, 2003). For example, one study compared the prevalence of suicide attempts among LGB youth to that of heterosexual youth. They discovered that, in the prior year, 29% of LGB youth had attempted suicide at least once, as opposed to only 6% of heterosexual youth (Kann et al., 2016). There has been consistent evidence demonstrating that LGB youth are at higher risk for mental health challenges.

Discrimination

LGB individuals are often subject to a greater degree of bullying and prejudice than their heterosexual counterparts. One study found that mistreatment, including harassment, discrimination, and physical violence, was associated with increased suicidal ideation, as well as decreased self-worth (Huebner, Rebchook, & Kegeles, 2004). Negative perceptions of homosexuality from others can also lead to increased internalizing problems and poor self-regard for LGB youth (Meyer, 2003). As LGB individuals are exposed to those negative perceptions of others they can internalize those negative beliefs and feelings about their sexual orientation (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000). They may wish they were heterosexual, feel the need to keep their sexuality a secret, struggle to understand their sexuality, and feel that they do not fit in (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000). When they experience this victimization, combined with family rejection, they are much more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy (Willoughby, Doty, & Malik, 2010). Additionally, when LGB youth hold negative attitudes about their homosexuality they are significantly more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors such as unprotected sex (Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz, & Smith, 2001). The bullying and prejudice experienced by LGB individuals only increase the stress associated with their identity formation and places them at higher risk for negative outcomes.

Disclosure

Predictors of Disclosure

First Disclosure

LGB youth are more likely to first come out to those they believe will be the most accepting. One study that examined this discovered that a large majority of LGB youth (73%) first disclosed to a friend (D’Augelli, & Hershberger, 1993). Additionally, they found that authority figures, such as

teachers, counselors, and clergy were the group of individuals who were the second most likely for LGB youth to first disclose to (8%), followed by mothers (7%), siblings (3%), and fathers (1%) (D'Augelli, & Hershberger, 1993). Many LGB youths do come out to their parents, but their parents are rarely the first people they tell.

Relationship with Parents

The likelihood of a child disclosing their LGB identity to one or more of their parents is closely related to the quality of the parent-child relationship. When family relations are more positive before disclosure the youth feels that they can be more open about their sexuality and are thus more likely to be out to their parents (Savin-Williams, 1989; Waldner, & Magruder, 1999). Parents who are generally more accepting and supportive of their child's independence tend to react in more positive ways when that child discloses their sexual orientation (Carnelley, Hepper, Hicks, & Turner, 2011). Conclusively, children are most likely to come out to their parents when the parent-child relationship is generally positive.

The demographics of the parents have also been significantly related to the likelihood of the child disclosing an LGB identity. Research has shown that LGB youth with relatively young parents are more likely to come out to them (Savin-Williams, 1989). This could be because younger parents are often more accepting of modern, less traditional ideas, and consequently are more likely to show greater acceptance when their own child discloses an identity other than heterosexual (Savin-Williams, 2001). In addition to age, another significant demographic factor that contributes to disclosure is ethnicity. Ethnic-minority youth are significantly less likely to be out to their parents, likely because their response would be more negative than in European American families (Morales, 1989). Overall, when parents are younger and part of a majority it is significantly more likely that their LGB child will come out to them.

Individual-level Stressors

Rejection

It is not uncommon for youth to worry about how their parents will respond to their disclosure of LGB identity. This element of the unknown typically causes the individual to experience anxiety and apprehension leading up to their coming out (Willoughby et al., 2008). Parental responses can vary significantly, and when that response includes rejection it is often linked to greater psychological difficulties for the child (Floyd, Stein, Harter, Allison, & Nye, 1999). D'Augelli and Hershberger (1993) discovered the following statistics relating to parental response to disclosure. They found that 55% of mothers responded in an accepting way, followed by 25% being tolerant, 8% being intolerant but not rejecting, and 12% whose response was rejecting. Additionally, for fathers they observed that 37% were accepted, 36% were tolerant, 10% were intolerant but not rejecting, and 18% were rejecting. (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). In more extreme cases the family may reject the individual to the point of disowning them. Few parents do cut off financial support post-disclosure (9% for mothers; 7% for fathers), but for families who do choose to exclude the LGB child, they must redraw the family's boundaries in significant ways (Willoughby et al., 2006; Willoughby et al., 2008). Overall, rejecting responses from one or both parents can not only negatively impact the parent-child relationship, but it can also increase the likelihood that they will begin to view themselves in less positive ways (Willoughby et al., 2008).