The impact and implications of two or more children identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) within the family system

Casey Michael Gamboni

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THE IMPACT AND IMPLICATIONS OF TWO OR MORE CHILDREN IDENTIFYING AS LESBIAN, GAY, OR BISEXUAL (LGB) WITHIN THE FAMILY SYSTEM

By

Casey Michael Gamboni

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Psychological and Quantitative Foundations (Couple and Family Therapy) in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

August 2019

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Armeda Wojciak
Dedication

To my brother and parents, it is discouraging for our family to not be properly represented in research and literature. Hopefully with this study that discouragement can be turned into comfort.
“It has been the primary goal to sensitize other researchers to the importance of discovering and reporting multiple homosexual sibling families. The multiple homosexual sibling families that have been reported provide support for theories that emphasize the importance of family relations in the etiology of LGBT identity.”

Barry M. Dank
1971
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

So many people have helped to make this dissertation possible. I would like to start by thanking my dissertation chair, advisor and mentor for the last three years, Dr. Armeda Wojciak for believing in my research and helping me grow as a researcher, clinician and professor. There were many days of meeting in your office questioning if I had the abilities and stamina to sustain this degree and I credit you for being one of my main supports to see not only this study but also my degree through. A special thank you to my committee Dr. Kayla Reed-Fitzke, Dr. Jacob Priest, Dr. Renita Schmidt, and Dr. Noel Estrada-Hernandez. Thank you all so much for your flexibility and willingness to be on this journey with me. Your feedback and guidance throughout this entire process has been incredible and I will be sure to take your skills shown to me and pass it on to the next generation of students.

To my wonderful family, thank you for supporting me through my academic journey the past decade. Your unconditional love, support and guidance throughout this process has made it barrable and memorable. I recognize that our family system isn’t the most traditional out there and I am forever grateful for that. Taking a system, that on the surface seems “difficult” and/or “messy” to some and treating it like it’s no other, made us the strong family we are today. I feel so fortunate enough to represent our family in research and have the opportunity to have other families like ours have a voice of relatability and significance to make this “different” family apart of the norm.

Thank you to my partner who has been by my side as I stress, complain, and push through this journey. You make coming home feel just like that, a home. I could not have asked for a more supportive teammate throughout this process. You have never once complained about my hours missed or dates that had to be rescheduled because of work and this project. You have...
always been understanding about this process along with patient and compassion. Thank you for accepting me even at times when I do not accept myself.

To my fellow doctorate students who I shared this journey with, thank you for allowing me the space to truly be myself in an environment that seems to stray away from loud, sarcastic individuals like myself. Thank you for laughing at my jokes even when they weren’t funny because that gave me the confidence and stamina to push on. I will continue be the man who you always hear before you see even on my worst of days. I could not have asked for better classmates, teachers, and friends. Your consistent support has continually made me feel appreciated and valued and for that I am forever grateful.

When I would talk openly to others about being gay and also having a gay brother, I would get three responses: (a) “I didn’t know that was a thing,” (b) “Wow! What was that like? and (c) I know someone with that same kind of family!” So finally, thank you to the participants in this study. There is not much more that I can say to express my gratitude for your participation. This study could truly not be in existence without your willingness to share your stories and deepest family vulnerabilities. You not only helped me collect data for this study, but you also reminded me of the power of words and the significance of openness. I am grateful for the time you took out for your participation and the information that was shared.
ABSTRACT

Coming out as a sexual minority can be a challenging process (D’amico, Julien, Tremblay, & Chartrand, 2015) and having supportive allies and advocates within the family makes that process less strenuous (Luke & Goodrich, 2015). The sibling relationship has been shown to play a significant supportive role in the lives of LGB people while coming out as sexual minorities (Haxhe, Cerezo, Bergfeld, & Walloch, 2017). Scholars have found that when a second child within the family system comes out as LGB, it gives the parents a chance to improve aspects of their parenting compared to the first child who came out to them. However, there is still little known about LGB sibling’s shared experience with both being sexual minorities. Chapter 2 in this dissertation is a systemic review on the topic of multiple LGB sibling families. Results indicating that these families exist but are not properly represented in literature. With LGB individuals having an increased risks of negative mental health outcomes (Russell & Fish, 2016), Chapter three explores the lived experiences of LGB individuals with LGB siblings. The purpose of the present study is twofold: 1) to examine if coming out to an LGB sibling increases the chances of an ally/advocate within the family and 2) helps lower negative mental health outcomes. Results from this qualitative study include significant differences of lived experiences based on order the siblings came out with family dynamic changes to improve family cohesion. Participants also reported viewing their siblings as allies which played a role in helping with negative mental health symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. Finally, this study utilized feminist family theory and found a less likely chance in power projection once both siblings were out. Clinical implications and future research directions will be discussed at length.
PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Coming out as a sexual minority can be a challenging process (D’amico, Julien, Tremblay, & Chartrand, 2015) and having supportive allies and advocates within the family makes that process less strenuous (Luke & Goodrich, 2015). The sibling relationship has been shown to play a significant supportive role in the lives of LGB people while coming out as sexual minorities (Haxhe, Cerezo, Bergfeld, & Walloch, 2017). Scholars have found that when a second child within the family system comes out as LGB, it gives the parents a chance to improve aspects of their parenting compared to the first child who came out to them. However, there is still little known about LGB sibling’s shared experience with both being sexual minorities. Chapter 2 in this dissertation is a systemic review on the topic of multiple LGB sibling families. Results indicating that these families exist but are not properly represented in literature. With LGB individuals having an increased risks of negative mental health outcomes (Russell & Fish, 2016), Chapter three explores the lived experiences of LGB individuals with LGB siblings. The purpose of the present study is twofold: 1) to examine if coming out to an LGB sibling increases the chances of an ally/advocate within the family and 2) helps lower negative mental health outcomes. Results from this qualitative study include significant differences of lived experiences based on order the siblings came out with family dynamic changes to improve family cohesion. Participants also reported viewing their siblings as allies which played a role in helping with negative mental health symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. Finally, this study utilized feminist family theory and found a less likely chance in power projection once both siblings were out. Clinical implications and future research directions will be discussed at length.
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Chapter One

PREFACE

INTRODUCTION

The sibling relationship has been credited as one of the longest relationships and most influential throughout a human’s life (Smith, Romski, & Sevcik, 2013). Unique qualities of this bond, including cordiality, clash, and competition, make it essential to examine this connection through multiple contexts (Bruist, Dekovic, & Prinzie, 2013). Scholars have found the significant influence siblings have on the LGBT community with statistics showing LGBT individuals coming out first to their siblings before anyone else (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). Scholars have also examined LGBT individuals coming out to their heterosexual siblings (Hilton & Szymanski, 2011; Hilton & Szymanski, 2014; Savin-Williams & Ream 2003; Huang, Chen, & Ponterotto, 2016), yet there has been limited studies exploring the sibling relationship when there is more than one LGB sibling within the family system. Dank (1971) wrote a case study on a family consisting of six LGB siblings with findings including significant parental influence on their coming out processes and the importance of relatability in terms of sexual orientation. The primary goal of this dissertation is to investigate families with multiple LGB siblings. Forty-five years after the Dank study and this unique family context is missing from our understanding of family dynamics.

siblings

Scholars have demonstrated the absence of research focusing on sibling relationships (Lamb & Sutton-Smith, 2014). Recent statistics have indicated that 85-90% of the world population has a sibling (Buist, Deković & Prinzie, 2013), yet, from looking at the current literature and research it seems psychological researchers have underestimated or overlooked the
value of the sibling relationship (Hilton & Szymanski, 2011). The sibling relationship is often the most long-lasting and influential relationship of a person’s life (Smith, Romski, & Sevcik, 2013). Siblings are often perceived as providing companionship and a unique influence on one another’s development and this pairing usually interacts daily; they frequently perceive one another as providing companionship, closeness, and nurturance (Diener, Anderson, Wright, & Dunn, 2015).

Psychological factors, such as anxiety, have been examined in relation to the strength of sibling dyads. Studies show that individuals with a strong and resilient sibling relationship have lower levels of anxiety (Jacoby & Heatherington, 2015). During childhood and early adolescence, positive sibling relationships also are associated with heightened opportunities for social functioning, self-esteem, and cognitive development (Bush & Ehrenberg, 2003). Researchers have also indicated the significance of the sibling bond when looking at stressful situations and experiences. Gass, Jenkins, & Dunn (2007) examined the potentially protective effect of the positive sibling relationship on child adjustment for those children experiencing a stressful or life changing event in their lives such as parental divorce, or death in the family. Scholars have also found that positive sibling relationships significantly mediated the connection between trauma and expression of internalizing symptoms for siblings in foster care (Wojciak, McWey, & Helfrich, 2013). Findings indicate that children who have affectionate relationships with their siblings were less likely to experience a change in internalizing negativity when compared to those children without affectionate sibling relationships (Gass, Jenkins, & Dunn, 2007).
LGB Family and Sibling Influence

The sibling relationship has been found to play an influential role for individuals coming out as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB). Savin-Williams & Ream (2003) studied over 2,000 LGB individuals and found that 38% of their sample first disclosed their sexual orientation identity to their brother or sister. Disclosing one’s sexual minority status to a sibling with whom they have a strong sibling relationship can also act as a safeguard against other taxing incidences. Huang, Chen and Ponterotto (2016) discovered that for some LGB individuals, sibling support buffers psychological pain including internalized homophobia and victimization and increases the LGB sibling’s self-acceptance and comfort. Hilton and Szymanski (2014), found that heterosexual siblings are more accepting of their LGB sibling when they have had contact with LGB individuals, greater knowledge of the LGB community, take a supportive stance on civil rights, and tend to have a more liberal ideology when it comes to political affiliations (Hilton & Szymanski). Regardless of the sibling’s sexual orientation, scholars have shown the significance and the gravity sibling closeness can have on support systems, feelings of safety, and acceptance within the family system.

Multiple LGB Sibling Families

Borrow (2014) explored coming out as LGB to your LGB sibling in her doctoral dissertation. The author states that within her study, the acceptance of the coming out experiences for both LGB siblings was positive and negative with an array of reactions and coping strategies families presented. One identified strength of having a second child come out, was that it gave the parents a chance to improve aspects of their parenting compared to the first child who came out to them (Borrow, 2014). Dank (1971) is a case study which examined a family consisting of ten children with six of the ten identifying as LGB. The sibling exploration was a case study examining the diversity of this specific family system. His findings found that
the siblings were negatively impacted by their father’s hostility, violence, and alcoholism but positively comforted by their mother’s affectionate and loving qualities which made the coming out process easier.

**PROBLEM**

Borrow (2014) suggests clinical implication for working with family systems with more than one LGB sibling; (a) family and community professionals being cautious when interpreting the origins of an LGBT status, (b) significant family-based interventions pertaining to the sibling relationship specifically mediation and sources of support, and (c) parents utilizing resources to aid their journey in coming to terms with having an LGBT child. Even with these significant implications, there are limitations to the field that warrant further investigation. First, scholars have indicated that having an accepting family and close sibling relationships reduces negative mental health outcomes in LGB individuals (Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010). Scholars have highlighted that LGB people are at an increased risk of developing depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation when compared to heterosexual adolescents (Russell & Joyner 2001; Safren & Heimberg, 1999). The increased likelihood of these mental health outcomes is due to the stressors LGB individuals face related to having stigmatized and marginalized identities (Rosario et al. 2002). Analyzing experiences of LGB sibling dyads is important due to both siblings at risk of these mental health outcomes along with both having the opportunity to be a source of support and allegiance (Hilton & Szymanski, 2014). Providing findings regarding negative mental health outcomes linked to sibling allies such as coping skills and significance of acceptance is essential for LGB life satisfaction and sibling closeness (Rostosky, Black, Riggle, & Rosenkrantz, 2015). Understanding this sibling relationship will help clinicians and other mental health professionals aid their clients in navigating family dynamics of LGB siblings and
the possible negative mental health outcomes that could follow. Additionally, seeking a deeper understanding of the significance of multiple LGB sibling families and sibling closeness has the potential to help lower the severity and/or presence of these negative mental health outcomes within LGB clients.

The second limitation within the current literature is that the LGB sibling identifying as an ally within the family system is an assumption that needs to be empirically supported. Coming out as a sexual minority can be a challenging process (D’amico, Julien, Tremblay, & Chartrand, 2015) and having supportive allies and advocates within the family makes that process less strenuous (Luke & Goodrich, 2015). However, siblings, regardless of their sexual orientation, are not always capable of taking an accepting stance when their LGB sibling comes out to them (D’amico, Julien, Tremblay, & Chartrand, 2015). By exploring this assumption, it has the potential to outline the supportive needs for LGB individuals post coming out experiences and the mental health outcomes that have the potential to follow. Scholars have shown that it is important to focus on the sibling’s reactions to the coming out experience because it can be a predictor of how other family members will respond (Hilton & Szymanski, 2014).

**PURPOSE OF DISSERTATION**

The purpose of this dissertation will be to examine the sibling relationship when more than one sibling identifies as LGB. Specifically, I will address the gaps in the literature outlined above by conducting in depth over the phone interviews with LGB individuals who have LGB siblings and utilizing a Feminist theoretical foundation to further understand results and implications. There has been a growing amount of research examining the sibling relationship when a sibling comes out as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) (Hilton & Szymanski, 2011; Hilton & Szymanski, 2014; Savin-Williams & Ream 2003; Huang, Chen, & Ponterotto, 2016).
However, current literature on families with more than one LGB sibling is limited to the areas of: (a) one study examining multiple LBG siblings; (b) works off the assumption of a sibling ally within the system; and (c) failure to examine negative mental health outcomes.

Barrow (2014) is one of two scholars to explore the sibling relationship when a second sibling comes out as LGBT. Utilizing a sample of 15, this qualitative approach found that when having watched a sibling go through a similar journey through the coming out process, it caused some participants to scrutinize their sense of self in relation to their sibling. The author found that the major long-term impact included the appreciation of a shared perspective with a similar sexual minority status. Through studying lived experiences, the author was able to provide insights into the LGBT identity/disclosure process, the sibling relationship, and the family of origin (Barrow, 2014). Where I see the gap in literature is the assumed identity of an ally if one sibling is already out as LGB to the rest of the family system. Along with examining the sibling ally identity, the impact that ally has on mental health outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation has yet to be explored by Barrow and other scholars.

Despite increasing evidence of the existence of multiple LGB sibling family systems being reflected in study samples (Balsam, Rothblum, & Beauchaine, 2005; Balsam, Beauchaine, Mickey, & Rothblum, 2005; Toomey, & Richardson, 2009), scholars have yet to explore the impact more than one sibling identifying as LGB has on the sibling relationship and the implication surrounding them. Though these scholars have supplied a solid base of support for the significance of the sibling dyad within the LGB population, less is known about the perceived support, experiences, or dynamic shifts within the family system when there is more than one LGB child within the family system.
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Qualitative

Guided by a Feminist Family Therapy theoretical approach, the following research questions inform the present study:

1. What are the sibling dynamic/interaction changes within the system when more than one child is LGB?
2. What are the lived experiences of lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) individuals who have siblings who also identify as LGB?
3. How does having an LGB sibling influence mental health symptoms/processes?
4. Do LGB siblings perceive their siblings as an ally? If so, how?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Feminist Family Theory

By incorporating feminist family theory, it challenges individual’s perspectives. Luepnitz (1988) discusses that the ability to challenge people’s patriarchy in a clinical context has to do with sensibility as opposed to agenda. Creating a space for people to examine their assumptions about what it means to have power within the family system is significant when exploring the idea of flexibility in the client’s lives (Luepnitz, 1988). Power is a topic of conversation that is incorporated with all clients when utilizing feminism techniques. Anyone in a relational context can learn the abilities to interact in ways that increase their connections and enhance their own personal power that they all embody (Nichols, 2013). Empowering individuals has the potential to lead the conversation to a more progressive and productive place.
Furthermore, a common parallel of power and the sibling relationship comes with birth order (Sulloway, 2001). Alekseeva, Kozlova, Baskaeva, & Pyankova, (2014) found that elder children, to a greater degree, tend to project dominating behavior toward their younger sibling however, they more often initiate cooperative activity while younger children are more emotionally attached to their sibling and need more of sibling’s help and approval. Within the context of the LGB identity, it is significant to explore if identifying as a sexual minority lowers the presence of power or intimidation and increases closeness between the dyad regardless of birth order.

**SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDIES**

The studies that will be outlined in this dissertation are important because they examine and seek to find a richer understanding of multiple LGB sibling families and the mental health outcomes that arise from having more than one sexual minority within the family system. With the inclusion of a feminist theory lens, the integration of both theories will provide a deeper comprehension of the sibling relationship and the significance of this dyad within a minoritized group. Before now, studies have lacked to depict the negative mental health outcomes of families with more than one LGB sibling and the assumption of a sibling ally to increase quality of life and sibling closeness.

The studies in this dissertation will focus on the sibling relationship when more than one sibling identifies as LGB and the experiences sibling face within this unique family system. As a result of these studies and the use of theory, I am hoping that these studies have the possibilities to come with many implications for clinicians and researchers such as: (a) continued research on the significance of the sibling relationship and the LGBT community, (b) developing a closer understanding of the importance of the sibling relationship within minoritized groups, and (c)
assist in bringing the sibling relationship and LGBT community into stronger research representations.

**SUMMARY OF ARTICLES**

To address research question number one, the first article within the dissertation is titled *The Family and Sibling Dynamic Changes When Two or More Children in the Family Come out at Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual (LGB): A Systematic Review*. This study is a conceptual piece focusing on the significance in interaction and dynamic changes when more than one child comes out as LGB. This review seeks to investigate literature examining the sibling and parent dynamic changes when more than one sibling within the system comes out as LGB minorities, and to contribute to the lack of literature that depicts multiple LGB identified sibling families. Methods for review included an evaluation of three different databases with specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. This systemic review includes: (a) literature on the family dynamics, sibling relationship, and LGBT individuals, (b) methodological approaches (screening, examining, and locating articles to fit the review), (c) results found within examination of articles, (d) and clinical implications pertaining to findings. Furthermore, a family systems theory lens will be utilized to explore family dynamics and multidimensional relationships found throughout family systems.

Addressing the remaining three research questions, the second article within the dissertation is titled *Exploring Mental Health Outcomes and Sibling Allies of Families with More than one Child Identifying as Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual: A Qualitative Study*. This study will utilize qualitative methodology to examine the following research questions: (a) What are the lived experiences of multiple LGB sibling families, (b) how does having an LGB sibling influence mental health symptoms/processes, and (c) do LGB siblings perceive their siblings as
an ally. Detailed over the phone interviews will hopefully provide rich insights on sibling
closeness, coping strategies, and if the role of an ally is played with the sibling. With little known
research about multiple LGB sibling families, individuals who come out as LGB with a lack of
allies are found to have increased risks of negative mental health outcomes such as depressive
symptoms, anxiety disorders, and suicidal ideation (Russell & Joyner, 2001). Furthermore, the
purpose of this study is twofold: (a) to further examine the sibling relationship when there is
more than one sibling identifies as LGB by addressing relevant gaps in the literature provided
and (b) provide in depth over the phone interviews of LGB individuals utilizing a Feminist
theoretical foundation to further understand results and implications.
Chapter Two

THE FAMILY AND SIBLING DYNAMIC CHANGES WHEN TWO OR MORE CHILDREN IN THE FAMILY COME OUT AS LESBIAN, GAY OR BISEXUAL (LGB): A SYSTEMIC REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

The process of growing up as a sexual minority has differing experiences depending on who one talks to. There is evidence to support that not disclosing or hiding your lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) identity can cause depression, anxiety, and severe feelings of isolation from others (Newheiser & Barreto, 2014). The significance that masking plays has led to in-depth research exploring how coping mechanisms and support from family and friends during the coming out process can act as protective factors (Nadal, Wong, Issa, Meterko, Leon, & Wideman, 2011). Family system dynamics change once one child within the family comes out as LGB in terms of support and possible personality commonalities (Shilo & Savaya, 2011). Studies have shown that the sibling relationship helps with the coming out process by having an ally present through the process (Huang, Chen and Ponterotto, 2016). This review seeks to explore and answer the question: What does the family process look like when more than one LGB sibling comes out, and how does both siblings coming out influence system dynamics and interaction changes?

LITERATURE

Family Interactions & Dynamics

Family dynamics are defined as ways in which members of a system interact with one another combined with their own individual likings and goals (Tucker, Finkelhor, Turner, & Shattuck, 2014). These dynamics can also be referred to as relational events that occur within a life span and these relational events vary vastly from system to system (Wagner & Mulder,
Family dynamics are informed by the various backgrounds family members bring to the family system. Research on family dynamics focuses on the similarities and parallels being expressed throughout the system. For example, mothers and fathers are viewed today as more alike in their gender roles compared to traditional gender stereotypes (Banchefsky & Park, 2016).

These dynamics can also change in many ways over a lifespan. There could be a death in the family, divorce of parents, or distancing of a family member for a myriad of reasons. Regardless of how these dynamics change, the interactions and inclusions that take place within a system alter how the family is feeling in that moment (Koren & Simhi, 2016). Schaber et al. (2016) explored how inclusion can play a large role in how a family’s dynamics change over time. Inclusion refers to the connections that narrate the expansion and presence of relationships within the family’s dyad (Schaber, Blair, Jost, Schaffer & Thurner). Inclusion involves subcategories of pattern interactions including boundaries, alliances, connectedness, and shared meanings. The development of inclusion is crucial for the family to create a strong structure and proficient guidelines that direct member’s emotional involvement throughout the system (Schaber et al.).

**Sibling Relationship**

Recent statistics have indicated that 85-90% of the world population has a sibling (Buist, Deković and Prinzie, 2013). Psychological researchers have underestimated or overlooked the value of the sibling relationship (Hilton & Szymanski, 2011). In fact, Buist, Deković & Prinzie, (2013) found it to be the most neglected relationship in psychological research and practice. The sibling relationship is a unique association which has shown to be classified by both affection and warmth combined with clash and opposition (Buist). Jacoby and Heatherington (2015) found
that this relationship plays a crucial role in the family’s life when it comes to influence of decisions and resiliency. These authors also emphasized the importance of support throughout the family system, including mother and father, to strengthen sibling relationship quality.

It is difficult to discuss the sibling relationship without mentioning the contrast of gender identity, age, or birth order. Frances Schachter et al. (1976) coined the phrase “deidentification” which means judgments of being different from one’s sibling. The authors show that same gendered siblings who are closer in age and in birth order are more likely to attempt differentiation from one another (Schachter, Shore, Feldman-Rotman, Marquis, & Campbell). Research has also found that siblings differentiate from one another to achieve separate domains of recognition and identity, which showcases a positive trajectory that does not hinder relationship quality in a negative way. (Feinberg, McHale, Crouter, & Cumsille, 2003).

The quality of the relationship that develops between siblings has been associated with both internalizing and externalizing symptomatology in children varying in age from preschool to adolescence (Gass, Jenkins, & Dunn, 2007). Findings include that children who have affectionate relationships with their siblings were less likely to experience a change in internalizing negativity when compared to children without affectionate sibling relationships (Gass, Jenkins, & Dunn, 2007). Research has also indicated the significance of the sibling bond and systemic support when looking at stressful experiences such as coming out as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (LGB) (Heatherington, & Lavner, 2008). This process can provide sexual minorities with important strengths that can be used effectively to manage stress related to their minority identity (Baiocco, et al., 2015).
LGB Community & Siblings

Studies have shown that coming out as LGB to your sibling can be rather difficult (Cox, Dewaele, Van Houtte, & Vincke, 2010; Valentine, Skelton, & Butler, 2003). Savin-Williams and Ream (2003) studied over 2,000 LGB individuals and found that 49% disclosed their LGB sexual orientation to their mother first, while 38% first disclosed to their brother or sister. Disclosing one’s sexual minority status to a sibling with whom they have a strong sibling relationship can also act as a safeguard against other taxing incidences. Huang, Chen and Ponterotto (2016) discovered that for some LGB individuals, sibling support buffers psychological pain including internalized homophobia and victimization and increases the LGB sibling’s self-acceptance and comfort.

Despite the fact that some individual come out to their siblings first, overall family dynamics may still lack acceptance for LGB members. Studies have shown that it is important to focus on the brother or sister’s reactions to the coming out experience because it could foreshadow or influence what may happen with the disclosure to the other members of the family (Hilton & Szymanski, 2014). Hilton and Szymanski (2014), found that heterosexual siblings are more accepting of their LGB sibling when they have had contact with LGB individuals, greater knowledge of the LGB community, take a supportive stance on civil rights, and tend to have a more liberal ideology when it comes to political affiliations (Hilton & Szymanski).

Multiple LGB Sibling Families

There is a limited number of studies examining multiple LGB sibling families. The effects of the coming out process on family dynamics can be impactful when one sibling comes out, but it is important to look at family dynamics when two siblings identify as LGB. Borrow (2014) explored coming out as LGB to your LGB sibling in her doctoral dissertation. The author states that within her study, the acceptance of the coming out experiences for both LGB siblings
was positive and negative with an array of reactions and coping strategies families presented. One identified strength of having a second child come out, was that it gave the parents a chance to improve aspects of their parenting compared to the first child who came out to them (Borrow, 2014). Dank (1971) examined a family consisting of ten children with six of the ten identifying as LGB. The primary goal for this source was to sensitize other researchers to the importance of discovering and noticing that there are systems existing with multiple LGB sibling families (Dank, 1971).

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

**Family Systems Theory**

Family dynamics and the sibling relationship can be described using a family systems theory lens. Family systems theory has become increasingly used in the literature over the last fifty years. Family systems theory has been identified as the next logistical step in the developmental stages of the human being following the work of Sigmund Freud (Kerr, 1981). As it applies to emotional problems, systems theory assumes that all significant members of the family play a part in the function of the system in relation to one another (Bowen, 1974). Within this perspective, families are best understood as a cohesive entity (Bertalanffy, 1950).

Family systems theory showcases that each member of the family has a role to play and rules to follow, which highlights the reliant nature of the family system and each member separately (Von Bertalanffy, 1968). Bowen (1974) explains that systems theory emphasizes the function of the structure and its able parts. Family systems theory also categorizes areas such as communication patterns within the family, boundaries, family dynamics, and roles of each member has throughout the system which can be understood when examining dynamic changes within the system (Rothbaum, Rosen, Ujiie, & Uchida, 2002). Family systems theory recognizes
the importance of sibling relationships as meaningful “subsystems” within the larger family system (Minuchin, 1988). Whiteman, McHale, and Soli (2011) write that the sibling relationship is fundamental to family systems theory and highlights the importance of understanding family dynamics and group differences through this multidimensional relationship.

PURPOSE

With the significance of the sibling relationship being articulated within the coming out experience for an LGB individual, it is clear that siblings play a large role in the LGB person’s self-acceptance, buffering other family members, and providing effective support throughout the experience of coming out (Huang, Chen & Ponterotto, 2016). The purpose of this review is to contribute to the lack of literature that examines multiple LGB identified sibling families and to provide evidence demonstrating the importance of sibling relationship when coming out. There have been studies conducted depicting the strength the sibling relationship has when it comes to resiliency, acceptance and conflict no matter what sexual orientation they identify as but where the literature is lacking is examining when more than one sibling identifies as a sexual minority. This review will outline the literature that is currently available on multiple LGB sibling families and provide a critique of the sample, design, procedure, and analysis.

METHODOLOGY

The following strategy was used to identify the articles in this systematic review. Three different databases were used: 1) PsychINFO, 2) EbscoHost and 3) Google Scholar. Key terms used within each databases were: 1) “lesbian, gay, bisexual siblings,” 2) “lesbian, gay bisexual brothers and sisters,” 3) “when both siblings are gay lesbian or bisexual,” 4) “multiple LGB sibling families,” 5) LGB family dynamics, 6) LGB sibling dynamics, 7) LGB coming out and sibling dynamics, and 8) Parents and LGB sibling dynamics. The inclusion criteria for this
systematic review were: 1) the study had at least two children in the family who identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, 2) the publication was in English, and 3) the publication was in a peer reviewed journal, dissertation and/or thesis. Studies were excluded were 1) if the study only had one sibling who identified as LGB, 2) if the publication was before the year 1980, and 3) if the study included transgender siblings. This review will examine the sexual orientation of the siblings, not their gender. Abstracts were identified and reviewed if they met the abovementioned criteria. If the criterion was not easily accessed by the abstract, then the manuscript was set aside for further evaluation. A total of four articles were identified and examined in this systematic review. This review also covers all of Prisma’s criteria for a systemic review along with a PRISMA flowchart pictured below.
Figure 1: PRISMA 2009 Flow Diagram

**PRISMA 2009 Flow Diagram**

Records identified through Google Scholar (n = 14,800)

Records identified through EBSCO (n = 104)

Records identified through PsychInfo (n = 6)

Records after duplicates removed (n = 14,712)

Records screened (n = 200)

Records excluded (n = 0)

Full-text articles assessed for eligibility (n = 200)

Full-text articles excluded, with reasons (n = 0)

Studies included in qualitative synthesis (n = 4)

Studies included in quantitative synthesis (meta-analysis) (n = 4)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title &amp; Author</th>
<th>Design</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Victimization Over the Life Span: A Comparison of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Heterosexual Siblings</td>
<td>Quantitative cross-sectional study which ran Hierarchal linear modeling analysis and Correlation</td>
<td>Psychological distress was measured by using the Brief Symptom Inventory, Suicidal Ideation, Suicide Attempts, and Self-Injurious Behavior Scale</td>
<td>N= 1,245</td>
<td>LGB sibling is at more of a risk of victimization compared to their heterosexual siblings but does not speak of the 19.4% of the sample of which both siblings identify as LGB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balsam, Rothblum, &amp; Beauchaine (2005)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mental Health of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Heterosexual Siblings: Effects of Gender, Sexual Orientation, and Family</td>
<td>Quantitative cross-sectional study that ran Multilevel modeling analysis correlation</td>
<td>Psychological abuse scale from the Childhood Maltreatment Interview Schedule—Short Form, Parent–Child version of the Conflict Tactics Scales, Childhood sexual abuse was assessed using a series of questions from the CMIS–SF, Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory (PMWI), Physical Assault and Injury subscales of the Revised CTS, Sexual Experiences Survey, Variable: lifetime victimization</td>
<td>N= 1,254</td>
<td>Sexual orientation significantly predicted suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, self-injurious behavior, and use of mental health services, but not psychological distress as indexed by the BSI subscales.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balsam, Beauchaine, Mickey, &amp; Rothblum, (2005)</td>
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</table>
Table 1-continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Research Design</th>
<th>Data Collection</th>
<th>Sample Characteristics</th>
<th>Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
- Questions consisted of eight open-ended questions and probes.  
- Questions including sharing experiences with their families, their sexual identification processes, and their coming out events. | 6 lesbian women, 5 gay men, 2 bisexual individuals, and 2 queer individuals N=15 | Having watched a sibling go through a similar journey caused some participants to scrutinize their own sense of self in relation to their sibling. Appreciation of a shared perspective on being two siblings who share a sexual minority status. |
| Perceived Sibling Relationships of Sexual Minority Youth Toomey & Richardson (2009) | Quantitative cross-sectional design with Descriptive surveys and scales | Correlation | - Demographic data questionnaire  
- The Sibling Closeness Scale (SCS)  
- Sibling Approval of Sexual Behavior Scale (SASBS) | 56 lesbian, gay bisexual or transgender reported information on 107 siblings | Respondents were more likely to be out to a sibling if that sibling were also LGBT. 100% of respondents who reported having an LGBT sibling were out to that sibling. |

**RESULTS**

**Sample**

The number of participants for each study varied, with all four studies using convenience sampling. Convenience samples though inexpensive and accessible, could lead to biased responses and troublesomeness of outliers throughout the samples (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). For Balsam, Rothblum, & Beauchaine (2005) and Balsam, Beauchaine, Mickey, & Rothblum, (2005), the same sample was used for both studies. Both articles imbedded helpful charts outlining all appropriate information and then broke them down by gender and sexual
orientation of each sibling. Though Borrow (2014) and Tommey & Richardson (2009) did not provide a graph depicting their demographics, their samples of 15 and 56 participants, respectively, were broken down by gender, education status, and age.

Sample size ranged for each article presented. Barrow (2014) offered the only qualitative look into LGB siblings when he interviewed 15 individuals. Both studies done by Balsam et al (2005) used a quantitative framework to look at between 1,245-1,254 individuals. Both of these approaches offer strengths and weaknesses, such as a higher effect size. However, Sandelowski (1995) argues that too large of a sample size as the potential to lack supportive claims and detailed analysis of the data collected due to the abundance of participants for researchers to analyze. Toomey & Richardson (2009), which is also a quantitative study, reported in their limitations section that their sample was too small, stating that the data had restrictive variability, making it more challenging to assess significant sibling distinctions (Toomey & Richardson, 2009).

All four articles presented had a lack of diversity with primarily Caucasian European/American participants. By not emphasizing race and ethnicity characteristics in the sample collected, the authors are excluding interrelationships of social class, differences, and possible discrimination that could hinder ones’ mental stability or acceptance of self/others (Gunaratnam, 2003). Lewis (2003) outlines and describes the significant difference of LGB individual’s statuses comparing both Caucasian and African American communities. His findings show that LGB African Americans are treated with more discrimination and disapproval of their own communities compared to their white counterparts because of their diverse upbrinings, thus it is important that studies examining the LGB community also explore the effects of demographics such as race, ethnicity, and social economic status to fully comprehend
and depict the most accurate findings possible. Furthermore, these four articles outlined in this review could benefit from cultural background information due to their smaller sample sizes.

**Measures**

The Balsam articles used different measures with the same sample. Balsam, Rothblum, & Beauchaine (2005) used psychological abuse scale from the Childhood Maltreatment Interview Schedule—Short Form which is a 7-item self-report scale measuring psychological abuse and assessing frequency of abusive actions with an alpha coefficient if .93. Parent–Child Version of the Conflict Tactics Scales was used to measure childhood abuse by a parent of adult caretaker. This measure highlights severity of physical abuse by a caretaker with an alpha of .79. Psychological maltreatment in the context of an intimate relationship was measured using the Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory, measuring physiological aspects of abuse using a 14-item scale with an alpha of .91. Physical Assault and Injury Subscales of the Revised CTS was used to assess physical assault in the context of an intimate relationship. Finally, a summary variable was created to understand overall lifetime victimization. The primary goal for this study was to explore sexual orientation as a predictor of victimization, using the sibling relationship to model the effects of an individual’s sexual minority status. What was lacking through this study was the significance the sibling relationship had on the scales presented. The findings concluded that the LGB sibling was at greater risk of victimization compared to their heterosexual sibling, which discounts the reported 19.4% of the siblings who also identified as LGB.

Balsam, Beauchaine, Mickey, & Rothblum, (2005) used a total of four measures for their sample. Suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and self-injurious behavior measure were used as a questionnaire to assess suicidal ideation and attempts. The Therapy, Psychiatric Hospitalization,
and use of Psychiatric Medications measure was used to ask participants about their past therapeutic experiences or hospitalization experiences. Asking questions such as whether they had ever been in counseling or therapy and whether they were hospitalized for mental health problems before age 18. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was used to assess for self-acceptance and self worth which is a 10-item assessment with an alpha of .89. The last measure was the Satisfaction with Life Scale was used to assess global aspects of life satisfaction. This was a 5 item scale with an alpha of .91. In both of these articles, as stated above, there is a lack of ethnic diversity throughout samples.

Though the authors state that there were attempts to recruit more individuals of color, questions about victimization and parent-child conflicts would have been significantly different, due to minority statuses, compared to the sample’s primarily white counterparts. The results of this study indicated that families, including the siblings, possess differing variations of mental health when having differing sexual orientations when it comes to life satisfaction, self-esteem, and distress. Similar to Balsam, Rothblum, & Beauchaine (2005), it is difficult to locate the correlation between the sibling relationship and the scales used to assess. Another similarity of both Balsam articles is the disregard of the reported 19.4 of multiple LGB identified siblings within their findings.

Borrow’s (2014) qualitative inquiry and constructivist grounded theory approach was comprised of three different stages: 1) interviews, 2) field notes, and 3) memos. Her interviews were done over the phone. One limitation utilizing this method is not having the presence of non-verbal or cues when asking questions to the participants (Bryman, 2012). However, because of the lack of geographical difficulties, the author was able to collect a wider span of participants and connect to a wider sample. The semi-structured interviews were comprised of eight open-
ended questions assessing for their coming out processes, sexual identity, and family experiences. Field notes were taken before, during and after the interviews took place to create possible codes for her analysis process. The author described her field notes as personal messages she would write herself after the interviews to conceptualize her future codes. Finally, memos were used to “act as a bridge between data analysis and thematic development” (Barrow, 2014, pg. 42). These memos were then divided into three categories methodological, thematic, and theoretical. Though the use of memos can be helpful in a team atmosphere to help divide the workload when coding, the use of it here in an independent dissertation seems unnecessary (Saldana, 2015).

Demographic information, which assessed age, gender identify, and sexual orientation, was first collected by Toomey & Richardson (2009). The Sibling Closeness Scale (SCS) and the Sibling Approval of Sexual Behavior Scale (SASBS) were utilized once demographic information was collected. The SCS is an eight-item questionnaire that assesses how close a participant feels to their siblings using 5-point likert scale questions. Possible score ranged from 8-40 with a reliability of .95. The SASBS is a sixteen-item 4-point likert scale questionnaire measuring how they would perceive their sibling’s approval and reactivity of their same-sex sexual experiences with scores measuring from 6-64 and a reliability of .98. The difficulty found with these measures were that both of the siblings were not taking the surveys, the data was limited to the LGB sibling. If both siblings were taking the surveys, it would allow for more accurate, descriptive data and the readers could fully understand both sides of the sibling relationship. Measures analyzing sibling relationships are quite scarce, with more measures examining perceptions as time progresses (Murray, 2000), which is what I suggest these authors to do.
Design

For Barrow (2015) and Toomey & Richardson (2009), these studies were a cross-sectional design created to investigate the sibling’s perception of their relationship. Mann (2003) states that cross-sectional designs are primarily used to study causation and prevalence but one fallback to using this mode of design is the lack of differentiation of cause and effect. For example, Barrow’s (2014) study demonstrates the effect of the coming out process on the sibling relationship but does not necessarily explain the causes (Mann, 2003). Balsam, Beauchaine, Mickey, & Rothblum, (2005), Balsam, Rothblum, & Beauchaine (2005), and Toomey & Richardson (2009) utilized a descriptive design, which means their participants were measured once with a clear establishment of associations between variables (Creswell, 2013). Experimental designs could have been utilized with all studies analyzed, which means the participants were surveyed before and after treatment to see if participating in the study would have affected their responses (Creswell).

Procedure

The same sample was used for both Balsam articles (Balsam, Rothblum, & Beauchaine 2005, Balsam, Beauchaine, Mickey, & Rothblum, 2005) and data was collected using mailed questionnaires as opposed to online questioning services. The fallback on collecting data in this fashion is the turn around on participants for the study. For both articles, 2,354 questionnaires were originally sent out. The total number of surveys used in the analyses were 1,254 for Balsam, Rothblum, & Beauchaine (2005) and 1,245 for Balsam, Beauchaine, Mickey, & Rothblum, (2005) because of unfinished questions or loss of interest resulting in a total loss of 1,100 possible participants. The data in both studies is also self-reported which also means it is subject to biases. Donaldson & Grant-Vallone (2002) state that self-reported data often threatens
the validity of research conducted due to participant’s possible tendencies to respond in certain ways without researcher’s knowledge. Toomey and Richardson (2009) recruited using one LGBT community center along with arranging three LGBT student group meetings at three different Midwestern universities. Though they recruited a sample of 56, it is not clear if the questionnaires were collected in person, online, or over the phone.

Barrow (2014) was the only study out of the four that was a qualitative analysis using one on one over the phone interviews. By doing so, the author expanded her diversity in the form of geographic location (Barrow, 2014). She stated that the interview processes of her sample took six months, and she recruited from various affirming organizations like the Human Right Campaign (HRC) and Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbian and Gays (PFLAG). Recruiting from accepting organizations such as these has a limitation. This could have influenced the data due to lack of diversity when it comes to acceptance/non-acceptance of the LGB siblings. PFLAG for example, is an organization of accepting families of LGBT individuals coming together to promote self-awareness and human rights for LGBT people. When recruiting participants, data could be skewed with lack of families who may not be as accepting as ones participating in PFLAG.

Due to Barrow (2014) using the only qualitative design, she was also the only one out of the four articles to specify trustworthiness for her procedures and analysis. Trustworthiness, as described by Shenton (2003), is a way for researchers to define their credibility, dependability, and allowance of transferability throughout their process of collecting, sampling, and analyzing, data. The author reports using a set of guidelines for qualitative family studies and obtained trustworthiness using credibility, transferability, and dependability (Barrow). The author highlights all three stating she utilized credibility by keep extensive and descriptive fields notes
and interviews and she established dependability by providing detailed verifications and reproductively of processes for the project due to it being a doctoral dissertation. Where the author’s trustworthiness falls short is in transferability. Though the author highlights that her transferability may seem contradictory due to the overall aim and goals for the study, an argument could be made that these findings can be extended into other population, but not necessarily LGB. For example, future studies could take these procedures and apply them to populations such as when both siblings have a disability of some sort or when they both have fell victim to abuse or neglect.

**Data Analysis**

Levels of significance varied throughout all studies analyzed. Barrow (2014) described her use of qualitative data analysis using transcriptions of all 15 interviews and reading each one twice before beginning initial coding. In vivo coding was utilized to create implicit meaning to what participants were saying. Axial coding was then applied by organizing the codes into specific themes and segments. The final phase of the author’s coding process was selective coding. Here she began to develop her driving themes and underlying messages through the codes presented. Barrow did all of the interviews and coding herself and had a dissertation advisor for guidance and questions. By conducting everything on her own, data could have been missed and caught by another person investigating alongside her. By working in a team, more work could be done at a faster rate, additional opinions could have been shared, and her trustworthiness could have been emphasized (Levi & Slem, 1995).

Toomey & Richardson (2009) found statistically significant results when assessing for outness to the siblings when looking at the SCS and SASBS scales. There was a positive correlation between both scales and there was significance when exploring the relationship
between the participants being out as LGB and SCS scores such that closeness. Scores in closeness were found to be higher for siblings to whom the participant was out as LGB to. One overarching limitation to this study was the one-sided data collected on the sibling relationship. The researchers would have benefited greatly by examining both sibling’s perspective as opposed to one perspective to encompass more accurate reflection of the sibling relationship and the quality of closeness. Dyadic analysis would have been helpful because it is a fundamental unit of interpersonal interactions and relations, which could correlate with the sibling relationship along with the measurements used (Estabrook, Wahlquist, & Behr, 1968).

Balsam, Rothblum, & Beauchaine (2005) and Balsam, Beauchaine, Mickey, & Rothblum, (2005) utilized hierarchal linear modeling (HLM) analysis for both studies. This form of analysis is best understood using hierarchical and cluster structures (Hox, 1998). For Balsam, Rothblum, & Beauchaine (2005) this analysis was used to compare LGB participants with siblings on overall lifetime victimization with findings concluded that the LGB sibling was at greater risk of victimization compared to their heterosexual sibling, also excluding the 19.4% of the sibling pairings who both identify as LGB which is why both of these studies fit the inclusion criteria for this review. In Balsam, Beauchaine, Mickey, & Rothblum, (2005) all data was analyzed using HLM along with multilevel modeling. In level 2 of their analysis the authors report examining family effects which was family function as the dependent variable. Results indicated that individuals with a sexual minority status were at higher rates of suicidal ideation and self-injurious behaviors and the sibling relationship, measured under family adjustment, predicted all psychiatric variables.
DISCUSSION

Overall the findings of these studies conclude that multiple LGB sibling families exist, however little literature has yet to examine this system with more in-depth analysis. There is significant evidence to support the sibling relationship acts as a safeguard when disclosing one’s sexual minority status (Savin-Williams and Ream, 2003), yet more studies need to explore when both siblings disclose their LGB identity. We also know that when a second child within the family comes out as LGB, it gives those parents an opportunity to improve their responses compared to possible negative reactions parents gave from the first child’s sexual minority disclosure (Borrow, 2014). This knowledge contributes to the understanding of the sibling bond within a family systems theory lens because of the emphasis on the sibling relationship subsystem pertaining to dynamics and interactions within the family (Whiteman, McHale, & Soli, 2011) which is important to emphasis moving forward with this kind of research.

Strengths & Limitations

The purpose of this systematic review was to provide a description and representation of multiple LGB sibling families highlighting the family dynamics when more than one child comes out as LGB by merging the critique of empirical research articles and fostering a family systems theory perspective. With the exception of Barrow (2014), none of the articles explored or examined when both siblings within the family system came out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. The samples on all four studies indicated that some data was collected by siblings who both identified as LGB (Balsam articles 19.4% of LGB respondents had LGB siblings and Toomey & Richardson (2009) had 9% of the respondent’s siblings also identify as LGB), which made these articles fit the inclusion criteria. These researchers did not examine the sibling dyad relationship specifically, instead reported the LGB sibling pairing and excluded them from their findings.
However, all four articles offer some of the foundational pieces needed to begin understanding the importance of LBG siblings and family dynamics.

There are limitations to this systemic review. Due to limiting number of articles on the topic of multiple LGB sibling families, there was a small number of articles to examine which leads to a lack of empirical data to analyze. The articles selected may also not be completely representative of the population due to both Balsam articles and Toomey and Richardson mentioning the population existing within their samples, but not going in depth with the overall themes when more than one child in the family identifies as LGB. Family interaction/dynamic pattern changes were also not strongly represented within the articles analyzed due to limiting about of articles representing the population and themes that arise within the context.

**Implications for Future Research**

As stated previously, psychologists and researchers have undervalued or disregarded the significance of the sibling relationship (Hilton & Szymanski, 2011). The LGB population is greatly marginalized in society and in a research context which has shown to restrict this community from seeking help and other resources to improve quality of life (Potter, Fountain, & Stapleton, 2012). More work and research is necessary to not only evaluate the importance of this relationship within the LGB context, but in any context regarding emotional support, mutual understandings, and resilience of the system within the sibling dyad. More specifically, through analyzing this research, it is shown that whenever the literature is focusing on sexual minority siblings, it is highlighting the relationship when *one* child identifies as LGB and the levels of acceptance in the household, as opposed to when *both* have a sexual minority status. More research and analysis is necessary moving forward to fully comprehend and understand the
sibling relationship and allow this population to have a valid and respectable place in the research realm.

**CONCLUSIONS**

With the lack of information regarding the family and sibling dynamics when more than one child comes out as LGB within the family, it would be difficult to make a confident conclusion regarding this family system based off of the research that has been provided. This systemic review shows that these families exist; however, there is a lack of studies and information examining these relationships. With Dank (1971) stating that his goal was to alert other scholars and academics to the significance of learning and perceiving that there are systems existing with multiple LGB sibling families, we now know of their existence within a research context, it is now the goal to delve deeper within this dyad and design studies centered around this population.
Chapter Three

EXPLORING MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES AND SIBLING ALLIES OF FAMILIES WITH MORE THAN ONE CHILD IDENTIFYING AS LESBIAN, GAY OR BISEXUAL: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

INTRODUCTION

Identifying as a sexual minority can be a challenging (D’amico, Julien, Tremblay, & Chartrand, 2015). Individuals who come out as LGB have increased risks of negative mental health outcomes such as depressive symptoms, anxiety disorders, and suicidal ideation (Russell & Fish, 2016). Having supportive allies and advocates within the family makes that process less strenuous (Luke & Goodrich, 2015). The sibling relationship has been shown to play a significant supportive role in the lives of LGB people while coming out as sexual minorities (Haxhe, Cerezo, Bergfeld, & Walloch, 2017). Borrow (2014) found that when a second child within the family system comes out as LGB, it gives the parents a chance to improve aspects of their parenting compared to the first child who came out to them. However, there is still little known about LGB sibling’s shared experience having shared sexual minority identities and the potential for negative mental health outcomes when both siblings are out at LGB.

LITERATURE

LGB Population

There are significant challenges in measuring the LGB population in the world (Gates, 2014). These challenges include differing definitions such as “coming out” and how to define a same sex relationship, differences in survey methods, and the variety of differing questions asked though the surveys provided (Gates, 2014). The Williams Institute took the average percentages of nine surveys from around the world and concluded that there are over eight million and counting LGB adults in the United States alone, comprising of 3.5% of the American adult
population. By the way of comparison, the analysis shown in Gates (2014) suggests that the size of the LGBT population is equivalent to the population of New Jersey (8 million), the number of adults who reported a same sex sexual experience is the size of Florida (19 million), and the those adults who reported some same-sex attraction is equivalent to the population of Texas (25.6 million).

**LGB Individuals & Mental Health Outcomes Due to Discrimination**

It has been found that individuals who identify as LGB are at an increasing risk of mental health distress and disorders due to social stress and discrimination (Meyer, 2013). Higher prevalence rates of mental health distress and disorders amongst LGB identified people could be due to stigma of sexual orientation, prejudice, and open discrimination which can lead to the creation of stressful environments and negative mental health outcomes within the marginalized minority groups (Friedman, 1999). Studies examining homophobia and discrimination against sexual minority groups based of culture and race have been widespread (Herek & Capitanio, 1995; Lottes & Kuriloff, 1994; Finlay & Walther, 2003). Though it has been found that homophobia does not appear more prevalent amongst African Americans compared to Whites (Herek & Capitanio, 1995) some studies have shown that White populations are significantly more homophobic than other racial groups (Finlay & Walther, 2003). Other studies have found no significant relation between race and attitudes toward the LGB population (Lottes & Kuriloff, 1994). Regardless of race, LGB adolescents are more likely to report perceived discrimination on the bases of their minority sexual orientation status (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009).

Findings have indicated that adolescents who identify as LGB (have same-sex attractions, have a sexual or romantic relationship with persons of the same-sex) are more likely than
heterosexual adolescents to experience depressive symptoms, anxious tendencies, and suicidal ideation or attempts (Russell & Joyner 2001; Safren and Heimberg 1999). This differentiation between sexual orientations is due to the stressors LGB individuals face related to having a stigmatized/marginalized identity (Rosario et al. 2002). For example, while bullying and victimization is prevalent amongst many youths regardless of sexual identity, it is particularly important

**Importance of LGB Cultural Differences**

There have been significant findings outlining the major differences in an individual’s coming out as LGB experience based on the intersectionality of their sexual and cultural identities (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004; Potocznik, Crosbie-Burnett, & Saltzburg, 2009; Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993). Researchers have indicated that Black and Latino LGB youth are involved in fewer LGB related social activities and report less comfort with others knowing and disclosing their sexual identity to others compared to White LGB youths (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004). African American and Hispanic families have also been found to be more willing to be able to adapt to difficult stressors such as a member coming out as LGB, highlighting the importance of familial strength (Potocznik, Crosbie-Burnett, & Saltzburg, 2009).

Newman & Muzzongro (1993) found the impact of LGB identity disclosure with the effect of race and family values on the coming out process. Families with more traditional views were found to be less accepting of their member’s LGB identity and emphasize the importance of support due to the discrimination and stigmatization in not only larger society, but also from their families, peers, and sometimes the gay community itself (Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993). It has been noted that cultural factors such as race, ethnicity, and differing ideologies do not
impede the formation of identity but may delay identity integration (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004).

**Significance of Allies & Advocates**

Washington & Evans (1991) define an ally as a person who is a member of the dominant majority who works to end oppression in their personal and professional life through support of oppressed populations. However, based on more recent literature on allies and advocates (Brooks, Robards, Gibbs, Lozano, & Edwards, 2007), LGBTQ individuals are also allies for each other and be active members of ally groups (Brooks & Edwards, 2009). Fingerhut (2011) found that alliances and advocates are greatest among individuals lower in prejudice and higher positivity towards LGB individuals. Furthermore, women, individuals with higher levels of education, and those with LGB friends are found to be more likely to be advocates for the LGB community (Fingerhut, 2011). Because LGBT youth are at risk of negative mental health behaviors and victimization (Kosciw, Palmer, Kull, & Greytak, 2013), the presence of allies and advocates within the family system is essential for higher quality of life for LGBT youth and adults.

**Significance of Siblings**

Statistics have shown that 85-90% of the individuals of the world population has at least one sibling (Buist, Deković and Prinzie, 2013). Yet, even with these rather staggering numbers, when looking at the current literature, researchers and scholars have tended to disregard the topic of the sibling relationship in academic writings (Hilton & Szymanski, 2011). This relationship has been found to be one of the longest lasting and at times the most influential relationship of a person’s life (Smith, Romski, & Sevcik, 2013). In childhood and adolescence, the sibling relationship usually involves daily interactions, but in adulthood, becomes more distant (Berg-
Cross, 2010). Because this relationship is known for interacting and nurturing on a daily basis in at least early life, there is a strong sense of companionship with unique influences on one’s developmental stages in life (Diener, Anderson, Wright, & Dunn, 2015). For example, it has been found that there is a decrease in anxiety and depression within the sibling relationship when the siblings have strong resiliency and a significant sense of support within the family system including mother and father’s backing to strengthen the sibling relationship (Jacoby & Heatherington, 2015). Interaction between the siblings also plays a role in the social life of each child, and this relationship has been found to be particularly significant in developing social skills, especially before they reach the age of starting school (Knott, Lewis, & Williams, 1995).

The quality of relationship that develops between siblings has been associated with both internalizing and externalizing symptomatology in children varying in age from preschool to adolescence (Gass, Jenkins, & Dunn, 2007). Findings include that children who have affectionate relationships with their siblings were less likely to experience a change in internalizing negativity when compared to those children without affectionate sibling relationships (Gass, Jenkins, & Dunn, 2007). Researchers have also indicated the significance of the sibling bond and systemic support when looking at stressful experiences such as coming out as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (LGB) (add citations).

**LGB Sibling Relationships**

When an LGB sibling comes out to their siblings early on, doesn’t always lead to acceptance. Studies have shown that it is important to focus on the brother or sister’s reactions to the coming out experience because it could foreshadow or influence what may happen with the disclosure to the other members of the family (Hilton & Szymanski, 2014). Hilton and Szymanski found that heterosexual siblings are more accepting of their LGB sibling when they...
have had contact with LGB individuals, greater knowledge of the LGB community, a supportive stance on civil rights, and tend to have a more liberal ideology when it comes to political affiliations (Hilton & Szymanski, 2014). Siblings have also been found to play a strong role in the prevention of negative mental health outcomes. Balsam, Beauchaine, Mickey, & Rothblum, (2005) found utilizing multilevel modeling analyses that sexual orientation predicted suicidal ideation, suicidal attempts, and self-injuries and concluded that siblings played a significant role in the therapeutic process to see positive change on the impact of family adjustment.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Feminist Family Theory

Feminist theory brings a critical examination of the inequities power plays in familial relationships and interaction processes such as sibling closeness in a diverse context (Few-Demo, Lloyd, & Allen, 2014). A common parallel of power and the sibling relationship comes with birth order (Sulloway, 2001). Alekseeva, Kozlova, Baskaeva, & Pyankova, (2014) found that elder children, to a greater degree, tend to project dominating behavior toward their younger sibling however, they more often initiate cooperative activity while younger children are more emotionally attached to their sibling and need more of sibling’s help and approval. Within the context of the LGB identity, it is significant to explore if identifying as a sexual minority lower the presence of power or intimidation and increases closeness between the dyad regardless of birth order.

By incorporating feminist family theory, it challenges individual’s perspectives. Luepnitz (1988) discusses that the ability to challenge people’s patriarchy in a clinical context has to do with sensibility as opposed to agenda. Creating a space for people to examine their assumptions about what it means to have power within the family system is significant when exploring the
idea of flexibility in the client’s lives (Luepnitz, 1988). Power is a topic of conversation that is incorporated with all clients when utilizing feminism techniques. Anyone in a relational context can learn the abilities to interact in ways that increase their connections and enhance their own personal power that they all embody (Nichols, 2013). Empowering individuals has the potential to lead the conversation to a more progressive and productive place.

**PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study will be to examine the sibling relationship when more than one sibling identifies as LGB. Specifically, I will address the gaps in the literature outlined in chapter 1, provide individual over the phone interviews of LGB siblings, and utilize a feminist family theoretical foundation to further understand results and implications. Specifically, these limitations include the lack of literature exploring negative mental health outcomes such as depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation that have been ignored within the presence of multiple LGB siblings and explore the differences siblings may possess when perceiving their siblings as allies.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The research questions listed below were constructed and informed by personal experience, as someone who identifies as a gay man with a gay brother, and through existing research of this particular family systems. Guided by a feminist family therapy theoretical approach, the following research questions inform the present study:

1. What is the sibling dynamic/interaction changes within the system when more than one child is LGB?
2. What are the lived experiences of lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) individuals who have siblings who also identify as LGB?
3. How does having an LGB sibling influence mental health symptoms/processes?

4. Do LGB siblings perceive their siblings as an ally? If so, how?

**METHODOLOGY**

**Design**

Phenomenology was used as the central methodological approach for this study because this method places focus on understanding the lived experience of individuals (van Manen, 1990). Phenomenology is a qualitative research method that holds the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis (Saldana, 2015). Phenomenological studies attempt to explore the meanings inherent in an individual’s lived experience(s) (Merriam, 2009). Importance is placed on identifying an individual’s perception, beliefs, awareness of, and personal meaning making of the phenomenon being examined (Creswell, 2013). The aim of phenomenological research is to describe the lived experience and interpret the meaning of such an experience without simply using preconceived notions or making blanket generalizations about an experience or a group of people (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Rossman & Rallis, 2016). Phenomenological research is interpretive, rather than only descriptive (van Manen, 1990). Because the underlying goal of phenomenological research is to give a voice to the individual about their personal interpretation of their experiences, phenomenology is an appropriate methodology for this particular study.

The primary mode of data collection for this study was over the phone interviews. After the pre-interview questionnaire, administered via Qualtrics, semi structured interviews were conducted with the intention of providing rich descriptions of the lived experience of multiple LGB sibling families. Significance is placed on locating the individual’s beliefs, awareness of, and personal meaning of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenological
research studies ask that we have a combination of raising the questions being asked, but also ‘live’ the questions being asked and ‘become’ the questions (Van Manen, 1991). Since my experience as a gay man who also has a brother who identifies as gay shaped the conception of this study, I believe that my personal experience was linked with how I interpreted the literature and other participant experiences. This phenomenological study allowed me the freedom to provide reactions within my own personal records taken through reflexive journaling.

**Recruitment**

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Iowa. Participants were recruited through the University of Iowa’s mass email directory. Potential participants were invited to complete an online survey via Qualtrics, a secured database for online survey software. A link to the survey was provided on the mass media sent out February 2019. The goal was to have 8-10 individuals responding to email request. Participants were contacted by phone and email to set up mutually agreeable time for an interview. A sample of 21 participants, demographics ranging in age from 18-45+ were interviewed for this study. Phenomenological research does not specify that a certain sample size is needed; however, saturation of the data is a common metric for determining sample size in this method. Having a smaller sample size allows me to develop a rich description of the participants’ experiences (van Manen, 1990). According to Patton (2002) the internal validity, meaningfulness of the results, and insights generated from qualitative research have more to do with the depth and richness of the data collected than with the number of participants in the study. With a smaller sample size, I was able to become immersed in the data and have substantial and prolonged engagement (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013) in the data analysis process.
Participants

Phenomenological research does not specify that a certain sample side is needed, however, saturation of the data is a common metric for determining sample size. The desired number of participants is between 10-15 and 21 were interviewed.

Inclusion Criteria

All participants in this study were above the age of 18 years or older. Participants were not excluded from this study based upon gender or any other demographic information provided. Participants identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual, and have a sibling who also identifies as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

Exclusion Criteria

Participants were excluded if they were below the age of 18. Participants were also excluded if they did not identify as LGB or did not also have a biological sibling identifying as LGB.

Informed consent was obtained via Qualtrics. Confidentiality was kept by utilizing Qualtric’s private online database that takes a secure password (created by me) to enter. Confidentiality was also shown with the use of initials and/or pseudonyms when discussing specific participant findings. The informed consent was described in detail, specifically how the identities of participants were kept confidential, and participants rights to refuse participation or to stop the interview process at any time. This was explained at the beginning of the Qualtrics survey. Participants were also informed of potential risks in participating; discussing one’s history as a sexual minority and their sibling relationship may bring up difficult feelings. Upon completion of the Qualtrics survey, all participants were provided with information for reaching the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, where they can find a therapist in their local area,
should they choose to. This information was given even if the participants did not meet the inclusion criteria. Once informed consent was obtained, participants were instructed to answer questions that screen for the presence LGB identity and siblings.

A total of 78 individuals either completed or started the online Qualtrics survey. An email was sent to all 78 individuals inviting them for a follow up over phone interview. Out of those 78 individuals, 21 engaged via email to agree to be a part of an over the phone interview. Out of those 21 participants, 11 identified as male (52%), 8 identified as female (38%), 1 identified as gender queer (5%), and 1 identified as gender non-binary (5%). In terms of race, the sample was predominantly white/Caucasian with 20 participants identifying as white (95%) and 1 participant identifying as black/African American (5%). Ages ranged from 6 participants being between the ages of 18-24 (28%), 12 participants being between the ages of 25-34 (57%), 2 participants being between the ages of 35-44 (10%), and 1 participant was 45+ (5%). With the use of the University of Iowa’s mass email directory to collect participants, the majority of participants (14) were based in Iowa (66%), 4 participants were in Illinois (20%), 2 participants were from Minnesota (9%), and 1 participant was in California (5%). Out of 21 participants, 10 of them were the first sibling to come out to their families as LGB (47%) and 11 were the second to come out as LGB second to their families (53%). In terms of birth order, 10 participants were older sibling (47%), 10 were younger siblings (47%) and 2 participants were twins (6%). It is also important to point out that 2 participants (6%) were younger than their sibling but came out first to their families as LGB.
Data Collection

Procedures

For this qualitative research study, I performed semi structured over the phone interviews which lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. The interviews began with me sharing the interview process which includes confidentiality and ethical assurance. Each interview consisted of one participant at a time. A Qualtrics survey was utilized to help collect demographic data during the recruitment process before the interviews began. Data was analyzed from the Qualtrics survey for examining race, gender, sexual orientation, and sibling birth order for participant demographics (pre-interview questions in appendix). Participants were given the option of choosing a pseudonym or be assigned a pseudonym by the primary researcher. Any identifying information that the participant did not feel comfortable including in the final analysis was exempt at their instruction. The semi structured individual interviews with the inclusion of open-ended questions was utilized for participants to describe their rich narratives of their experiences with being LGB and having a sibling who is as well. Questions were designed to reveal themes and patterns related to their experiences, sibling relationship quality, and mental health outcomes pertaining to their sexual minority identity.

All phone interviews were recorded using a digital recorder connected to the primary investigator’s telephone. I transcribed each interview which included every word, stutter, pause, and hesitation. Such detail of discussion assumes great significance that reveals how things are being said and is not limited to just what is said which calls for codes to convey such details (Poland, 2003). Responses were excluded from the transcribing process if they were casual conversation between me and the participant that had nothing to do with the study or research questions. All responses that were excluded from transcriptions were either not helpful in
answering the research questions above or the informed consent process which was at the beginning of every interview.

The purpose of the study was explained to the participants again at the start of the interview, which reminded them of their rights as research participants to withdrawal from the study at any time. The interview protocol, guided by Phenomenological methodology, included the following questions:

1. Tell me about your identity as an LGB individual?
2. Tell me about your experience having a sibling who also identifies as LGB?
3. Can you describe what your experience was like as LGB while you were growing up?
4. In what ways has your sexual identity impacted your sibling relationship?
5. Inversely, in what ways have your sibling relationship impacted your sexual identity?
   a. Who was born first?
      i. Does their age impact your perception of them?
      ii. How would you describe the power dynamics between you and your LGB sibling?
6. In what ways do you think having multiple LGB individuals in your family influences your family dynamics?
7. Do you have any negative mental health outcomes pertaining to your sexual minority status (such as depression, anxiety, or suicidal ideation)?
   a. If so, can you tell me about any mental health treatment?
   b. What was most helpful?
   c. Unhelpful?
8. Would you consider your LGB sibling to be an ally of yours?
a. Why/Why not?

b. If yes, how so?

c. If yes, how does your sibling ally differ from other allies?

9. Since coming out, how has your sibling relationship changed?

10. How has your culture influenced your LGB identity and relationship with sibling?

   a. How has culture influenced your family dynamics with having more than one LGB child?

Table 2: What Interview Questions are Answering What Research Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is the sibling dynamic/interaction changes within the system when more than one child is LGB?</th>
<th>Can you describe what your experience was like as LGB while you were growing up?</th>
<th>Inversely, in what ways have your sibling relationship impacted your sexual identity?</th>
<th>Who was born first? Does their age impact your perception of them? How would you describe the power dynamics between you and your LGB sibling?</th>
<th>In what ways do you think having multiple LGB individuals in your family influences your family dynamics?</th>
<th>How has culture influenced your family dynamics with having more than one LGB child?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are the lived experiences of lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) individuals who have siblings who also identify as LGB?</td>
<td>Tell me about your identity as an LGB individual?</td>
<td>Tell me about your experience having a sibling who also identifies as LGB?</td>
<td>In what ways has your sexual identity impacted your sibling relationship?</td>
<td>Since coming out, how has your sibling relationship changed?</td>
<td>How has your culture influenced your LGB identity and relationship with sibling?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does having an LGB sibling influence mental health symptoms/processes?</td>
<td>Do you have any negative mental health outcomes pertaining to your sexual minority status (such as depression, anxiety, or suicidal ideation)?</td>
<td>If so, can you tell me about any mental health treatment?</td>
<td>What was most helpful?</td>
<td>Unhelpful?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2-continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do LGB siblings perceive their siblings as an ally? If so, how?</th>
<th>Would you consider your LGB sibling to be an ally of yours?</th>
<th>Why/why not?</th>
<th>If yes, how so?</th>
<th>If yes, how does your LGB sibling differ from other allies?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

I conducted and transcribed semi-structured, open-ended interviews with the participants, in which participants’ lived experiences of being LGB with LGB sibling(s) was assessed within an individual interview. The interview(s) ranged from 45-60 minutes in length with the primary researcher. All interviews took place over the phone. As an interviewer I implemented a more conversational approach when conducting the semi structured interviews with participants. I asked follow-up questions with any queries I suspected to further investigate the participant’s experience. Any follow up question asked was for clarification I felt necessary in order to fully comprehend and gain a deeper understanding of the participant’s feelings, opinions and/or perceptions of questions asked.

**Phenomenological Data Analysis**

Groenewald (2004) emphasizes the changed definition of ‘analysis’ when interpreting phenomenological data due to analysis meaning “the breaking of parts” which would cause me to lose the whole phenomenon. Instead, he encourages the description of the analysis to be, “the systematic procedures to identify essential features and relationships” (Groenewald, 2004, pg. 49). Data was analyzed using Thematic Analysis. Thematic Analysis involves open coding, creation of axial coding, and generating group themes (Creswell, 2013; Saldaña, 2015). As researchers, we strived to become immersed in the data and have substantial and prolonged engagement in the data analysis process. Thematic analysis refers to creating out themes and
configurations from the qualitative data collected (Merriam, 2009); while the coding process is a lot of the time lacks simplicity (Saldaña, 2015), I developed an organized methodological system for collecting, coding and organizing data received.

Open coding is a lot of the time known as the first step in phenomenological analysis (Saldaña, 2015), the transcribed interviews were read line by line and placed into categories of codes that created using a cutting out method created by the primary investigator. Open coding will continue past saturation to ensure that codes continue throughout the data (Rallis & Rossman, 2012). I then collapsed codes into axial codes, in such a way that the concepts formed during open coding related to one another and were reviewed by constantly comparing categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Saldaña, 2015). I used reduction when constantly comparing codes throughout the open coding and axial coding process. Phenomenological reduction emphasizes repeatedly reducing the phenomenon of interest to its very core (Merriam, 2009; Saldana, 2015). As a result of axial coding the reader should be able to have a better understanding of the lived experiences of LGB sibling experiences.

My coding process is depicted in the chart below (table 2). After every question was asked, the answer given by the participant was then transcribed by the primary investigator and sent back to the participant for member checking. Once sent back from the participant, I started reading every sentence line by line and coming up with specific themes that fit the participant’s depiction of their experience. Themes and subthemes were created once I started seeing saturation within the data and participants were describing very similar experiences. As seen in the results section, no subtheme has less than four quotes that fit each category created. I color coded every theme throughout the process, as seen below and added subthemes. For example, the participant’s response to the question “tell me about your experience having a sibling who
also identifies as LGB?” was given to every participant. The participant then gave their answer which included three overarching themes: (a) sibling ally, (b) power balance, and (c) lived experience.

**Figure 2: Coding Process Chart**

**Interview Question:**
PI: “Tell me about your experience having a sibling who also identifies as LGB?”

**Transcript (Participant’s Answer)**
“We were once very close and with time we have just drifted. We had a lot of similar friends, listened to the same kind of music/watched the same television, and spoke often. I am the younger out of the two of us and looking back on it now I look at it like it is a classic sibling relationship. The older sibling projecting power onto the younger sibling all through childhood and that with time that power becomes less powerful into adulthood and doesn’t have as strong an impact, which then leaves the older sibling feeling powerless, discouraged, and confused as to where the relationship is without that power. Like when a villain in a movie after they lose their superpowers and the good guy’s kindness prevails… We grew up similar, look relatively the similar, and are both gay. I guess there was this small part of me that thought when I came out, he would be upset because being gay was his thing and I was stealing his thunder.”

**Coding**
“We were once very close and with time we have just drifted. We had a lot of similar friends, listened to the same kind of music/watched the same television, and spoke often. I am the younger out of the two of us and looking back on it now I look at it like it is a classic sibling relationship. The older sibling projecting power onto the younger sibling all through childhood and that with time that power becomes less powerful into adulthood and doesn’t have as strong an impact, which then leaves the older sibling feeling powerless, discouraged, and confused as to where the relationship is without that power. Like when a villain in a movie after they lose their superpowers and the good guy’s kindness prevails… We grew up similar, look relatively the similar, and are both gay. I guess there was this small part of me that thought when I came out, he would be upset because being gay was his thing and I was stealing his thunder.”

**RED Theme:** Sibling Ally
**Subtheme:** Ally vs. Closeeness.
When he first came out feeling very close with his sibling and then as time progresses, drifting

**GREEN Theme:** Power Balance
**Subtheme:** Only Room for One
Participant feeling like the power was not balanced and one sided

**BLUE Theme:** Lived experiences (Second Out)
**Subtheme:** Your thing to Our thing
Sibling taking longer to come out due to feeling like they are taking something from sibling
Trustworthiness Methodology

Data triangulation is often used in qualitative studies as an influential strategy for offering validation and credibility of qualitative analysis (Rothbauer, 2008). By establishing trustworthiness within the study, I provided the groundwork for developing comprehensive qualitative findings (Koch, 1996). Qualitative methods generally triangulate data by utilizing a variety of data-gathering techniques such as participants’ interviews, artifacts from participants, participant observations, and other documents to establish trustworthiness in the research (Merriam, 2009; Glesne, 2011). Participant interviews are the primary source of data collection for this phenomenological study; however, to increase trustworthiness in this study, I utilized the data analyses of the Qualtrics survey and the interview protocol, comparing codes that derived from the interview protocol data to the pre-interview questionnaire survey responses. This enabled cross validation of the data.

With the use of data triangulation, I bracketed myself accordingly in order to develop an even deeper understanding of the participant’s experience.

Additionally, to focus on transferability of findings, I used a self-reflexive journal throughout the study and data collection. When interviewing participants, I would write down any theme or answer to a question with the time stamp on the recorder that was pertinent to answering the research questions. I also wrote down any inflections, hesitations, or laughter throughout the interview. Following transcribing the pre-interview questionnaires and over the phone interviews, I journaled about initial impressions, emerging themes, and possible biases that may be occurring to assist in transferability. Notes from these reflexive journals will be used during data analysis, helping to aid in the development of topics and groups. The notes gathered
through this process will also be made public on the University’s Onedrive. Anfara, Brown, & Mangione (2002) argue that the data collection and note taking process for qualitative researchers need to be more public to address stronger validity using what they call “electronic journals.” After every interview I uploaded the reflexive journal to Onedrive to make the process “more public” yet still following proper confidentiality and institutional review board’s qualifications.

I also accomplished member checking by sending all participants a copy of their transcribed interview via email which was collected during the Qualtrics survey. This was implemented so that participants had the opportunity to make any corrections to the transcript they felt were necessary. Participants were each given a week to contact me via email with any clarifications they deemed fit to be made. Member checking was also done to make sure that the voice of each participant was properly represented as accurately as possible.

**Researcher as an Instrument**

Within qualitative research and the use of semi structured interviews, the main instrument for data collection is the researcher themselves (Creswell, 2013). Because of this, unique research characteristics have the potential to influence a collection of empirical materials (Pezalla, Pettigrew, & Miller-Day, 2012). My feminist standpoint on researcher as the instrument explores and acknowledges that research is affected by his own and other worldviews. Brodsky (2008) explains that the researcher becomes an instrument through the relationship they build with participants during data collection. The author goes on to state that instead of minimizing alliance present, feminist work theory stresses the importance of these relationships.

As a gay man myself, I have found major influence within my relationship with my sibling who also identifies as a gay man. With time, our relationship has taken many turns both
positively and negatively which impacted dynamics between the two of us and the rest of our family. Power differentials because of birth order, presence of a sibling ally, and negative mental health outcomes on both of our parts play an important influence in how we see ourselves as individuals and as brothers. Being a feminist who believes in social political, and economic equality of all sexes is also worth mentioning when examining power within family systems relationships.

The next section explores the founding themes and elements that were derived from the participant interviews and the Qualtrics survey. The results of the study are spoken for in both the participant’s own words and the primary researcher’s interpretations of their lived experiences with identifying as gay, lesbian or bisexual and having a sibling with the same minoritized sexual identity.

RESULTS

“There’s an unspoken message that the only stories worth telling are the stories that end up in history books. This is not true. Every story matters. My father’s story matters. My sister’s story matters. We are all worthy of telling our stories and having them heard. We all need to be seen and honored in the same way that we all need to breathe.”

-Viola Davis, May 2018
Interview with Brené Brown

Phenomenological studies focus primarily on the participant’s lived experiences (Merriam, 2009; Glesne, 2011). Phenomenology gives the opportunity for the participant to write their own story in collaboration with the researcher’s interpretation to unveil fundamental meaning of the lived experience (Creswell, 2013). A common narrative shared through many participants (about half) was the overwhelming curiosity of my background and how happy they were to have the opportunity to be involved. Mike shared,
I don’t think I have ever heard of someone even curious about my experience or anyone else’s for that matter, on this topic. It is refreshing to hear that other families like mine not only exist but possibly be thriving.

Participants reported other people’s responses to them learning of what their family system is like with having more than one LGB sibling. Stephanie reported:

I have to say it is off-putting at times when people hear I am a lesbian and that my brother is gay. I feel like a tourist attraction that people are intrigued by and visit but then learn more about it and seem disappointed. Like in Iowa there is the “world’s largest frying pan.” It is one of the top attractions with thousands of people visiting a year. But every time I have gone, you see people walk up to it, maybe take a picture, and then wonder what is keeping them there. That is how I feel when people learn I am a lesbian with a gay brother. They are initially intrigued and then when I tell them nothing is really that different the interest seems to dwindle which then leaves me feeling like I am the one that disappointed them.

Hayden stated:

I feel like anytime my sister and I meet people they are shook to their core when they learn we are both lesbian which is so weird. I question if they met a family like this before? or have they met gay people before? I guess I can understand the reaction and interest on a surface level because it is nontraditional, I guess. I have gotten so used to it that if they are straight, I ask if their sibling is as well and when they say yes, I act just as surprised or intrigued. That usually shuts them up (audible laugh).

Brian reported:

You would think that this family does not exist very often, but it totally does. When
people learn that my brother and I are gay I get all the time that they know someone
whose family is made up like that or they are gay, and their sibling is as well. Kind of
puts a lot into perspective when it comes to opening up people’s ideas of what is a family
and how it is comprised.

The goal for this section is to explore the lived experiences of lesbian, gay or bisexual
(LGB) individuals who also have a sibling who identifies as LGB. Specifically seeking to
understand if they perceive the presence of a sibling ally within the family system assists, and
how their sibling relationship has influenced their mental health outcomes such as depression,
anxiety or suicidal ideation. Along with the study’s goals is my goal of allowing these
participant’s voices to be accurately heard and properly represented with the upmost respect and
support. Furthermore, with there being no true definition of the word “family” within the field of
marriage and family therapy, it is also my goal that this study represents strength, understanding,
and compassion for this kind of family system for future practice and proper representation
within a research context.

Twenty-one individuals participated in this study. The description of the demographics
(Table3) which were collected utilizing the Qualtrics survey includes the participant’s name
(pseudonym), age, gender identify/preferred gender pronouns, race/ethnicity, location, whether
they were first or second out, and birth order.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender Identity/Pronouns</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>First or Second Out</th>
<th>Birth Order</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>Male (He/Him/His)</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>California</td>
<td>First</td>
<td>Older</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>Male (He/Him/His)</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Illinois</td>
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Within the phenomenological thematic analysis, 5 essential themes and 16 thematic elements represented the lived experiences of the participants who identify as LGB and have an LGB sibling were found from the data analyzed. These themes and elements are depicted below (Table 4) and will be discussed at length within this section.

**Table 4: Themes and Elements**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Research Question #1: Lived Experiences</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- First Out Sibling Experience</td>
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<tr>
<td>- A Cultural Struggle to be proud</td>
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<td>- No Yellow Brick Road</td>
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<td>- Second Out Sibling</td>
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<td>- Not Outnumbered</td>
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<td>- <em>Your</em> Thing to <em>Our</em> Thing</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Family Dynamic Changes</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>- No Limits to Discussion</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Not Inviting Change</td>
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<td>- Inclusion of Education</td>
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**Table 3-continued**

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<td>- The Assistance of Therapy</td>
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<td>Power Balance</td>
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<td>- Reciprocal Power</td>
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<td>- Only Room for One</td>
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**Lived Experiences**

The first theme that was captured throughout this study was the overall experiences these LGB siblings had when growing up with another LGB sibling within the family system. I split this theme into two separate subsections; (a) First out sibling experience (10 participants), and (b) second out sibling experience (11 participants). During the stages of data collection, it became apparent that there were two very different sibling experiences of having more than one LGB sibling based on the order the participants came out to their siblings and other family members. The first out sibling, most often the older sibling, but not for every participant, were trail blazers in paving their own paths with its own set of struggles and the second out sibling felt an obligation and restriction to come out due to that already blazed trail. These themes will be explored in depth throughout this section.

As a researcher and someone who comes from a similar family system than the participant studied, one participant’s comment stood out to me. Greg shared,

I can’t imagine my life without my sibling. They are just such an integral part of who I am at this point in my life. We are so close, and they mean so much and I just can’t imagine my life without them.
This comment really set forth this theme as it reflects many participant’s experiences with having not only a close relationship with their sibling but the influential role they have played in each other’s lives. The common themes found for first out siblings are (a) A cultural struggle to be proud, and (b) No yellow brick road. The common themes found for second out siblings were (a) Not outnumbered, (b) Your thing to our thing, and (c) following suit.

First Out Sibling Experience

A Cultural Struggle to be Proud. One common theme throughout every participant’s experience was a struggle to feel prideful for their LGB identity at some point of their life. This “struggle” was present whether they were once stressed coming out to support systems, fear of society’s perception of them, or negative mental health outcomes to follow. Participant’s cultural background played an important role in whether or not they were comfortable to be open and out while growing up or even as adults. This showed more prominently with the first out sibling participants. Culture is defined as “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits such as racial, religious, or social groups” (Merriam-Webster, 2019). Chris stated:

Hypermascularity was definitely projected onto my brother and I within the community as black men living in an urban setting. Which at the end of the day made it more difficult to truly be myself earlier on. Anything feminine was wrong and you’re looked at completely different. Thankfully my family isn’t like that. I grew up with a single mother so maybe that had something to do with it. Not having a father project onto me and my brother. My dad died when I was young, and I have heard wonderful things about him, but I don’t know if he would have the abilities to comfort of a gay son.

Culture is not limited to racial background but exceeds outside the realms of ethnicity into domains such as religion. Greg shared:
I came out when I was in college. Like most people, I would say it was the age of the internet, but it was also the age of not knowing you could find others like you. Knowing that other gay people existed but I was also very religious in my youth, so I only knew those specific connotations which were not positive, so I pushed the feelings down. It wasn’t until I went to college where I started understanding myself more.

Along with religion playing a major role in the participant’s upbringing and their parent’s influence on how they see themselves, some participants went further into trying to please family members. Nick stated:

I had a girlfriend all through high school and most of college because that is what I thought I was supposed to do. We even had sex regularly. My parents were so proud, and I even have recollections of my father asking me how my relationship was going when it was with a girl… he hasn’t asked me how my relationship is going with my now boyfriend of 4 years.

Culture can also be looked at as the sports and activities you participate in from a young age which can impact your comfort with self and coming out. For example, Laurent stated:

Coming out in high school mainly was because I had played soccer for 13 years and being a part of a sports team, and that is where I heard a lot of more… fun words aimed around gay people and that gave me more anxiety. I really enjoyed this sport for so long and would think “would I have to give this up if this keeps happening?” again, thinking about the worst case scenarios. And it took me a while to get to that point.

No Yellow Brick Road. One major difference expressed between the first out participants and the second out participants was that they had a “path to pave” or “trail to blaze” with no socially acceptable guidelines to follow. This narrative falls in line with other LGB
literature around coming out and having to be not only a minority within society’s perceptions of the LGB person but also a minority within your family (Merighi & Grimes, 2000; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). Brian reported:

Throughout life, some are given a path that is past down from generation to generation. If you fit your family’s expectations that others took before you, that path is well lit and easy to see. If you don’t fit those expectations, like most sexual minorities, it’s like that scene from Wizard of Oz where they see the Emerald City, but the yellow brick road is covered with poppies. Seeing your final destination but needing to create your own path to reach the end of your journey which assumes happiness. I think I am still tangled in the poppy’s weeds, but I’ll find my way out eventually.

Second out siblings even used that same kind of vocabulary when discussing their first out sibling. Peter stared:

My brother is five years older than I am and he did a fantastic job being an older brother and paving the way for me to live, think, and learn the way that I do. I feel fortunate enough to have someone who was as hands on in my upbringing as he was. I do think that he thinks of me more as a bother than a brother because of how much he has done raising me, but I think that is the developmental adjustment we are in the midst of since we are both now adults.

Some first out participants even expressed that they thought their sibling’s coming out process was easier due to that path being paved. Chris stated:

I think my sibling felt more comfortable to come to me when he was questioning things because I was already out. I was there to answer any sort of questions he had. It almost felt like I was pushing him to be gay at one point because we would talk, and he would be
questioning himself and I would take a step back and be like “support him either way. Not just if he is gay.” He has also told me that it would have been a lot more difficult to come out if I already didn’t do it, so I am not just giving myself all this credit (audible laugh).

Some first out siblings reported around how glad they were that they paved the path for their second out siblings. For example, Greg shared:

When my younger sibling came out, it was easier. Just like any sibling relationship like when parents are a little more intense with the first born and then a little more relaxed as things go. Like when I got my first tattoo my parents yelled at me and then when my sibling got their first tattoo they were like “oh that looks nice!” but that imbalance is nice because my sibling has had more of a struggle with confidence and mental illness so looking back I am kind of glad that they had someone ahead of them to clear the way because already struggled with so much that if it made it a little easier, I am glad.

This “blazed trail” has also been expressed within not only the nuclear family but with extended family as well. Nick reported:

It’s interesting because my cousin is also gay, and he told me that because he saw how I handled things when I came out, it made it easier for him to do so. He told me that I blazed the trail for gay people not only in my nuclear family with my brother but extended as well with him. That is pretty cool.

There were also participants who noted that they didn’t necessarily blaze the path for the sexuality aspect of their families, but they recall having to blaze the paths for other avenues in their life. For example, Amy shared:
I have never really looked at myself as a queer trail blazer within my family. As far as my sexuality goes, for example, I was more upset that my family couldn’t blaze a trail for me to understand how to go to college or how to sustain college. No one beat a path for me to learn how to behave in college or go to college or what you do when you are in college. The sexuality aspect was common in my family so that was all taken care of. It’s not like that path was completely blazed in my family but they started a fire somewhere. So, I was actually more upset about other paths that hadn’t been paved than the ones that were.

**Second Out Sibling Experience**

**Not Outnumbered.** All participants reported that at one point they struggled with their coming out process, but in different ways. For the second sibling who came out, common vocabulary shared was “begrudgingly,” “impressionable,” and “hopeful.” Some participants even expressed that now with both siblings identifying as LGB, there wasn’t the sense of feeling like a minority within the family. Chris shared:

> My father passed away when I was a child, so I never really knew him. So, it was me, my brother, and my mother when I was growing up. Then when my brother came out of the closet, my mom was like “well damn, am I gay too?!” (audible laugh). She expressed this because the gays in our family outnumbered the straights which we always took pride in and still do to this day

Hayden also expressed similar feelings when explaining that when he came out there were equal numbers of straight people and LGB representation within his family. He stated:

> Yeah it is interesting to think that my family is split. It’s just my parents and my brother and I so there really isn’t “a minority” in the group. Yes, my brother and I are minorities
in society, but I am glad that we aren’t in our nuclear family. My parents are 2 for 2!

Thank God (audible laugh).

Taylor shared similar remarks having to do with how grateful he was to have his out sibling so that they were in this together and not alone. He stated:

Thank God I wasn’t alone in this process. My parents, being so religious and projecting all over us all the time while growing up, would have been even more difficult. I was out of the house at 16 and that was right after I came out to them, so I didn’t even really get a chance to see any change within them. They have two gay children that they don’t talk to, which means they don’t talk to their only two children.

Mike reported similar remarks to not feeling alone when both siblings were out, not because the LGB representation was outnumbered, but they were not alone in general. He shared:

I have an older sister and a younger brother who is straight I wouldn’t say that there is the same amount of gay people as straight because it it’s 2 and 4 but just the fact that I was not alone though the process of coming out really changed things. I am glad that all siblings are expressing themselves for all I know the way they want to and not what they think they should be doing. I also guess it is an assumption that only my sister and I are gay, but I am pretty sure my other siblings are straight (audible laugh).

**Your Thing to Our Thing.** For the second sibling to come out, a common narrative throughout these participants was a combination of the comfort they had because of that already “paved path” along with the discomfort of taking what is not there’s. Both sibling’s LGB identity becoming not just a first out sibling identity but now a shared sibling’s “thing.” Peter shared:
I guess there was this small part of me that thought when I came out, he would be upset because being gay was his thing and I was stealing his thunder. Like being gay makes you different and in not a bad way and the fact that both of us are gay makes it our thing and not his thing. It is weird talking about gayness like its ownership but whatever (audible laugh).

Stephanie recalled very similar remarks having to do with coming out second and feeling like she was taking something. She shared:

There was definitely a part of me that questioned even more of myself because my sibling already was out. “what are the chances?” I would think to myself. I was also a very impressionable, angsty teen/college aged person so anything that caused a touch of drama I would exclude myself from. I did have the thought that my brother would be upset which ironically enough kept me in the closet for a longer period of time.

Out of all the first out participants, no one interviewed for this study felt like something was being taken from them when their younger sibling came out. Chris stated

Yeah that was definitely a thing that my brother and I would talk about at length when we would have our discussions. I would have to repeatedly tell him that this isn’t about me and what I think, it is about you and your happiness. He felt so bad that he was stealing my thunder and that was not even in my wheel house. Looking back on it is trippy because knowing him now, I can’t believe he felt that way (audible laugh).

**Following Suit.** One common subtheme that was expressed by second out participants was utilizing how the family reacted to the first out sibling’s coming out process and either following suite or keeping them in the “unwelcomed closet.” Hayden shared his experience looking back on his brother’s coming out process. He stated:
Watching my brother go through the coming out process definitely made it easier for me to follow suit. I didn’t even know at the time of his coming out that I was gay, but I was reflecting on the experience when it was my time. My mother was very accepting of him and I am close with her, so I was not worried at all with her. My father was a different story which I knew was going to be a hard time.

Some participants found that watching their siblings come out first was difficult based on their gender. Mike reported:

My sister is obviously female, and I honestly didn’t know if my parents were going to react any differently based off of my sister being a woman and I being a man. I think there is the relative acceptance of women expressing sexual fluidity that on the surface level is easier for others to accept but men don’t have that same freedom. At the end of the day my parents were no different and both accepting but it was definitely something that held be back just for a little bit before diving right into the coming out process.

Some second out participant experiences were not as easy to follow suit due to their parent’s negative reactions to their first out sibling’s experience. Stephanie stated:

Seeing my parent’s reactions to my brother coming out definitely did not make it any easier for me to come out. If anything, it pulled me back into my closet because of fear. Fear of losing my family, fear of what people would think of me, and fear of who I really was. I had gay friends, I like to think of myself as a social justice warrior just by being an outspoken woman and I still struggled to come to terms with what I was thinking and who I was.

Taylor recalled a similar expression of fear to come out because of his parent’s negative reaction to his sister. He shared:
I always had inclinations that she wasn’t like everyone else. Since she is older, she was really the only possibly gay person I saw on a consistent basis. My sister came out when I was 15 and after seeing how happy she was, regardless of my parent’s negativity, inspired me to examine myself and my own sexuality. I never was attracted to girls. I remember seeing two girls kiss one time and wondered why men were so attracted to this. When my sister came out, she stopped speaking to my parents. It is almost like she knew how they were going to react, so she acted before they could. I honestly didn’t think my parents would go as extreme as they did with kicking me out since I was only 16 but what are you gonna do?

Jill shared her experience coming out after her older sister did and the comfort she felt based off of her experience. She reported:

I was like “My mom is cool with it and I know my dad is as well.” So, it was comfortable and both of them were okay with my sister and so I know they will think it is okay for me to be bisexual as well, so it definitely made it easier for me. It was still a nervous experience but easier

Alex had the unique experience of being the younger sibling and being the first out sibling as LGB to their family. They expressed:

We came out differently to our parents but are in the same family. I think people expect the older sibling to come out and then the younger sibling to do it similarly and we had a very reversed way of doing so. I think my sibling did in some ways consider the feedback I received in how they came out to my parents. My parents were very chill when I came out with my sexuality so that gave my sibling the feedback that everything is going to be okay and they don’t need to make it a big deal.
Summary

An individual’s experience as a sexual minority is vastly different than someone else’s even when they are under the same roof. Depending on if the sibling came out first or second, it is quite apparent that this makes an influence on not only their coming process but their lives as LGB identified individuals as adults. For first out siblings, cultural influence expressed by some really held them back from being who they wanted to be which lead them down a darker path than was necessary. Both racial influences and religious ideologies restricting their expression from being seen. However, it was also expressed that by coming out as LGB it opened the doors for cultural representation if they didn’t fit the demographic of a racial minority or religious influencer. First out siblings also were found to be trail blazers for their second out siblings by paving their own unbeaten path and going against familial and societal norms (7 participants). Second out siblings had their families come to the realization that the minorities were not outnumbered within their families (5 participants). It was also found that sexual identity was more obvious in the form of ownership when looking at it through a sibling’s lens (6 participants). Second out siblings feeling like they were taking something from their first out siblings’ life. And finally, witnessing the first out sibling’s experience with coming out to family members influenced how the second out sibling was going to move forward or take a step back with their process (8 participants).

Family Dynamic Changes

From the beginning of this research study, I was interested in not only the sibling’s interactions with one another, but also the interactions within the entire nuclear family system. Looking back on my chapter two, it is apparent that the family dynamics within a system knowingly impact an LGB’s person’s comfort with communicating about and sustaining familial
relationships (Balsam, Beauchaine, Mickey, & Rothblum, 2005; Borrow, 2014; and Tommey & Richardson, 2009). All participants expressed ways that their family’s dynamics changed once both siblings were out as LGB. As was stated in chapter two, with a lack of information within family studies literature regarding the family and sibling dynamic changes when more than one child comes out as LGB, it was difficult to make a confident conclusion of their dynamic/interaction changes regarding this family system based off of the research that has been provided. With the information provided moving forward in this section, I have hopes that those gaps are one step closer to being filled. The common themes found within family dynamic changes are (a) no limits of discussion, (b) not inviting change, and (c) inclusion of education.

**No limits to discussion**

A narrative that was expressed at length by many participants was the shift in communication once the “secret” of the sibling’s sexuality was out and expressed. Regardless of how family dynamics change over time, the interactions and inclusions that take place within a system alters how the family is feeling in that moment such as when siblings come out to their families (Koren & Simhi, 2016). Due to this obvious shift in communication, many participants felt their family’s communication improved once both siblings were out. For example, Amy shared:

> It is true that there are no limits to discussion. Like for example I was dating someone and brought them home and my gay cousin was home from the military and he wanted to have a sex toy party with family and friends, so I brought my partner and she as like “This is the weirdest thing I have ever been to” and I was like “well, welcome! Grandmas here! Get some cake!” Our communication is powerful, and it is fun to think this through.
Chris had a similar experience with his brother and mother once they were both out to her. With this example, he not only shares the comfort aspect but also broadens his ideas to what a family can talk about with each other. He expressed:

I think when we were both finally out, it brought all three of us closer. We are relatively close, and I see them on a regular basis. I think us both being gay has opened up the floodgates when it comes to communication. I don’t know what it is about being gay, but it makes having “tough” conversations easier in terms of it makes topics that would normally be vulnerable a lot easier. Like sex for example. Sex is a weird topic to talk to family about but with us it is easy since we have that comfort and commonality. There are lines of course but something so taboo is so easily comforted. It’s almost like being gay is taboo so anything is on the table.

Participants reported that their families were one of few spaces for them to open up freely about opinions due to their identity work through their coming out process. Mike stated:

With my sister and I, it was nice because when we were in our early 20’s we learned how to communicate properly to each other and our parents when we were around our mid 20’s which was a process within itself. But honestly, when we got it down it made communicating with my family easier than anyone else in my life oddly enough (audible laugh).

Participants also reported that communication between siblings improved once both of them were out to their families. Caleb reported:

Communication definitely changed a lot once both of us were out. Not right away but he is very private and doesn’t even like family to know where he lives because he is that private. So, when I first came out it was like that but now, we will talk about other family
members and he will come to me to talk so it definitely changed by leaps and bounds. He can open up to me and I believe it is because of that shared identity.

Laurent also reported similar experiences of when both siblings were out, it not only improved their communication but their relationship as a whole. He reported:

I think both of us being gay is something that has helped us grow closer. We are common in age; we are only a year apart. We are there to support each other even more so now than before. It was interesting during the process of coming out because he was my confidant who I was fully processing this with and coming to terms with this even before I told my parents.

Not Inviting Change

Another common theme through the change in dynamics within family systems was the lack thereof change present. Many participants reported that there wasn’t a need for change. However, others felt as though there was an opportunity to see growth and were left with feelings of “disappointment,” “frustration,” and “disconnected.” Stephanie for example shared:

It’s frustrating because I wish there were opportunities to see change within my family. I came out when I was older, so I am to an extent disconnected from my family because I don’t live with them, but I wish I could be able to see the work they have been doing, if my parents are doing work... but from what I have seen they haven’t made the strides I would like them to be at.

Some families found a major change in dynamics by not having any dynamics. Taylor for example reported:

The dynamics changed primarily due to disconnecting completely from my parents because they threw me out of the house when I was 16. They didn’t even allow for
dynamic to be changed or practiced and didn’t even try. By changing dynamics, they
would have to look deep down inside of themselves to examine motive to their feelings
and I genuinely think that is what prevents them from the necessary exploration.
Some participants reported no communication happening because that was the norm even
before both siblings came out. Bob reported:
We still don’t necessarily as a family talk about relationships that much because it wasn’t
something we ever did before. So, it isn’t as so my sister is bringing up a girlfriend if she
is seeing a girl. She has before talked about her boyfriend’s, so I am not sure if that is a
reflection of anything but yeah it really isn’t mentioned.
Participants also reported that both siblings being gay felt like it was something their
parents didn’t want to have to “deal with.” Colin reported:
Dynamics really changed for my younger brother. It was like a thorn in my parents’ side
that they had to deal with something like us being gay, that they didn’t really want to deal
with. As a fundamental dynamic my parent’s relationship to my brother and their
relationship to me, I think my younger brother had a difficult relationship with my
parents, especially my father, so that dynamic already didn’t help by him being gay.
Some participants didn’t notice any changes into their dynamic, however, their families
are still taking an accepting stance. Anne reported:
I think I find myself catching people being not considerate of what they are saying. That
isn’t anything that is in the immediate family, that’s more extended family. There wasn’t
a lot of talking about our sexuality once we were both out. It was more like “Okay this is
it. We accept you both now let’s move on.” It is all good but nothing worth going in dept
about.
Inclusion of Education

Many participants reported that once both siblings were out as sexual minorities, the family took a stance around educating themselves of the LGBT community to either understand a differing sexual orientation compared to their own or another way to show their support. For example, Alex shared their experience of their parents asking questions to seek understanding of not only their sexual identity but also their gender identity and how that overlapped with their sibling’s coming out process. They shared:

My sibling was talking about their sexuality when they were a senior in college and I was talking about my gender at the same time which was my freshman year of college so there was this dynamic of “Oh we don’t need to worry about older sibling and them coming out because we have this gender stuff to look at” which led to a lot of discussions and them learning about identity.

Caleb shared a similar sentiment about the inclusion of educating his family on the LGB community for them to show support and understanding. He shared:

Really the biggest thing for me was when he was the only out person in our family the family narrative was a lot of “ok there is only one person, gay people are not that common in society and we don’t have to take the time to learn what that means” but when I came out people really started shifting to “ok this is something we are going to notice” and when I came out it not only shifted perception of more LGB people around us but also just having that second voice in family conversations is significant. Instead of one there are two and people are a lot more open to listening to what we have to say.

Other participants went so far to say that they feel like teachers of a class when it comes to sharing their experiences as a gay person. Peter reported:
To some point I feel like a teacher when I go home because they have so many questions for me to answer. But hey I guess that’s okay. How would they know otherwise? They’re straight. I guess I am grateful that they’re asking as opposed to assuming. I think both of us coming out made it more obvious for them to ask because if it were just one of us it would have been easy to just let my personal life slide under the table.

There were even participants who took an educational stance with their sibling because they wanted to understand their differing coming out experiences. For example, Ella shared her experience of conversations with her 12-year-old brother about his experience since he knew at such a young age and she didn’t know her sexual identity until later adolescence. She reported:

I find myself wanting to connect with him on things about being LGB and I want to know what it is like to know when you are so young or at least to feel comfortable saying it to someone because I didn’t even entertain the idea until high school and so I am curious about his experience and wanting to talk to him more about it. I am learning through his experience and he is the much younger one which I think is so cool.

**Summary**

A child coming out to their family has the potential to lead to many dynamic changes when it comes to interactions, communication, and closeness which has yet to be explored throughout extent literature. First, multiple participants expressed that there were no limits to their communication once both siblings were openly out as LGB to everyone within the system (14 participants). This noteworthy shift in communication was found through participants as the freedom to communicate on many topics outside of their sexuality, broaden the individual’s horizons on what they can and cannot discuss with their families, and open up space to practice improved communication with others around them and outside of the family system. Second,
along with change in these dynamics comes with the lack thereof change. Participants were found to be disappointed in their family’s “stubbornness” and “frustration” to look beyond their biases and limited perspectives to see change through (5 participants). Lastly, and inclusion of education was found on both the family’s part and the sibling’s with participants reporting questions being asked and authentic curiosity of experience being expressed (10 participants).

Sibling Ally

Throughout extent literature, the sibling relationship has shown to play a supportive role to individuals who are LGB (Hilton & Szymanski, 2014), however, the sibling relationship as an ally is a role that has had little exploration through scholars. Because LGB individuals are at risk of negative mental health outcomes and victimization (Kosciw, Palmer, Kull, & Greytak, 2013), the presence of and ally within the family system is essential for higher quality of life for LGB youth and adults. There were mixed reactions by participants if they viewed their sibling as an ally with the majority stating yes and others reporting indecisiveness with their responses. The definition of “ally” was utilized as a person who works to end oppression in their personal and professional life through support of oppressed populations (Washington & Evans, 1991). For the context of this study, we are broadening this definition to include individuals who are also a part of the particular “oppressed population.” Throughout data collection there seemed to be an overall distinction between sibling closeness and sibling as an ally. The common themes found within participants were: (a) assumed acceptance, (b) ally vs. closeness, and (3) an ally when no one else is.

Assumed Acceptance

The first common theme when exploring the sibling relationship as an ally was the assumed acceptance that was between both siblings. It was a common narrative for many
participants interviewed that they felt safer and more comfortable with their sibling because of their similar sexualities. When participants reflected, they would recall just assuming that their sibling was accepting during their coming out process because they had the same sexual orientation. For example, Peter reported:

   It is really difficult to talk about my coming out experience without thinking about my brother because he played such a significant influence in my coming out experience. He was the first person I came out to because I was comfortable. At that time, he had already come out to me so that comfort came from an already knowing acceptance… or I guess assumed acceptance.

Some participants reported that their sibling’s assumed acceptance influenced them later down the line but not right away. Caleb reported:

   It was interesting with me being bisexual at first until I identified as gay, he was more into gay things like bars and shows and did more of dressing up to go out and you know when I took that bi stepping stone, I wasn’t into that and judged him for it because of growing up in a rural community. It is something he opened my eyes to and now I do those things myself now. So yeah, on the whole there was like a assumed acceptance for the both of us.

The assumed acceptance was even present for siblings who went through different coming out experiences then their sibling. Taylor stated:

   Getting thrown out was traumatic and that wasn’t something my sister had to go through. With that being said, our relationship has had its ups and downs, but I have never questioned her acceptance. Not knowing where I was going to end up. I grew up walking passed homeless people on the street and thought to myself “How does someone get
themselves there.” I did 3 years later. That is a lot for people to ponder and get. And I get it. I am a lot. But the people that stay are my allies and my strong supports. They aren’t going anywhere.

Participants also reported that the strong sibling ally relationship is also closely related to a best friend’s relationship. Alex reported:

It is really nice to have someone who can relate to what you are going through. Whether that be your personal journey or with relationships. I think we are all looking for that like in a best friend or a sibling and I am lucky to call my sibling my best friend and we do have this relationship that maybe others get in their best friends.

**Ally Vs. Closeness**

In terms of the sibling relationships being an ally, many participants expressed the differences between siblings who they were close with versus siblings who were allies. Many participants reported the ally relationship was very strong and obvious in the beginning because they were communicating and close once they were both out but that communication eventually wore off with time and age. Others expressed that they were once very close and now with less communication, still does not question the strong alliance they have. For example, Peter stated:

I feel like when it comes to family frustrations, we are the only people who can relate and understand one another. That happens very infrequently now. Not because the frustrations have decreased, but I get the impression that his comfort in disclosing information to me has also decreased which is also a shame.

It was apparent through interviews that the presence of an ally seemed very strong while going through the coming out process and not that the ally identity went away, there are just little opportunities to “naturally show being an ally with time.” Nick stated:
When we both came out and were open with one another which made me feel supported but now as we grow up, he really doesn’t open up to me which sucks. I wouldn’t say that he isn’t an ally anymore, he just doesn’t have the opportunities to show it. I am a very open person who can talk about anything and I just assumed he was the same. Turns out he is not and is more to himself.

Once again, participants discussed that the closeness or support “faded” or “drifted” because of little opportunities to show it. Hayden stated:

I think it brought us close when we came out but with time could have been an aspect that made us drift. This is not a fully thought out thought but when we came out, we were each other’s support system and then that eventually faded and now since we are adults and living two very different lives, we are losing commonalities. Both of us being gay isn’t enough anymore to sustain a relationship.

Colin also echoed his experience of his sibling as an ally of something it once was when he stated:

I guess that term ally is not one that really has crossed my mind before, but I think it was. I think for me it was either subconscious. I have felt closer to him than any other family members and remain close and speak frequently by phone.

Walt described the unique relationship with his sibling who he would describe as not close with but wouldn’t question his supportive ally identity. He shared:

I think that it is weird because we hardly ever talk but when we are in the same room there is like this instant connection with honesty and sharing that feels like we are really close even that we don’t talk 11 months out of the year. So, the few times we do there is a lot of support and trust in that space and a lot of that has to do with partners or
experiences or just similar life things that I wouldn’t talk to my other family members about. A space that feels safe enough to talk about LGBT community and our shared experiences.

An Ally When No One Else Is

Participants reported that they believe their siblings are allies even when no one else within their community or in their family wasn’t. Some participants disclosed that when they had difficult coming out experiences, their sibling was never in question when it came to support, acceptance and alliances. For example, Bob reported:

I think that aside from the LGBT identity, your sibling turns into an ally when you may have a parent who turned against you. Especially in the context of my queer identity so I think that is something that brought us together was this agreement when it came to our parents of “yeah this brought us together” in certain situations so that would definitely make her an ally because we both feel the same way and can identity when certain things are wrong and maybe your parents are not being nice about your identity.

Participants reported the sibling as an ally in many ways when it comes to communication with other unaccepting family members. For example, Summer reported:

We are an ally to each other in so many ways. If another family member is being homophobic towards us in any way, we have each other to discuss and support each other in that way. Even if that means going to that family member together and saying “hey, what you did to my sister was homophobic and that’s messed up.

Colin reported similar experiences of being an ally to his LGB sibling when his family wasn’t and wishing he was that strong ally while growing up so that his brother would not have to take the “brunt” of all the conflict surrounding sexuality. He reported:
I just recall weird conversations that my younger brother had to go through provoked by my parents trying to rub his nose in his sexuality as if it was something that was dirty or shameful. So, if I were present, I would have definitely said something. He spent a lot more time around my mother for example than I could ever bare to.

Anne reported similar statement around having an LGB sibling being a constant support when others are not when she reported:

She knows what I am going through. She understands what I am going through so there is no reason for her not to be an ally. They will sit there, and support and they may not know what to do but that is sometimes all you can do. When there are others who are not accepting, I know she is there as a constant support.

Participants also reported that they are allies to their siblings not necessarily because of their family’s unacceptance, but because they are the only person they are out openly as LGB.

For example, Ella shared:

My sibling is more comfortable to come to me with whatever conversation topic he has on his mind because he is not out to my family. He has always been very curious and willing to ask questions and that has been true since we were very young. There isn’t sibling rivalry because our age difference is so big (8 years) and there hasn’t really been tension.

**Summary**

Extent literature has found that the presence of a sibling and familial support during the coming process leads to more positive outcomes such as lowering the chances in negative mental health outcomes and close relationships (Hilton & Szymanski, 2014). However, exploring the sibling as an ally has yet to be empirically supported through literature. Participants disclosed
that the definition of an “ally” is not limited to just support but also means standing up for the community and accepting sibling and other LGB representation. Many participants reported feeling an assumed acceptance from their LGB siblings because they were also LGB and shared the same sexual orientation which came with the assumption of not “disapproving” (6 participants). Another common narrative described was the “temporary” or “faded” communication around being supported and being an ally (5 participants). Many participants disclosed that the communication between siblings of support was surrounding their coming out process but “dwindled” as years went on and siblings grew up. And finally, siblings were also found to be an ally within the family when no one else is, standing up for one another against unaccepting family members or people in the community (11 participants).

**Mental Health Outcomes**

Scholars have found and continue to examine the increasing risk of negative mental health outcomes LGB individuals have due to the homophobia, stigma and open discrimination projected onto this population (Friedman, 1999; Meyer, 2013; Finlay & Walther, 2003). With the decrease in anxiety and depression within the sibling relationship being found when the siblings have strong resiliency and a strong sense of support within the family system (Jacoby & Heatherington, 2015), it is pertinent to explore the sibling ally relationship to see if there is a decline in these same negative mental health outcomes when more than one LGB sibling is present within the family system. Many participants reported negative mental health outcomes due to their sexual minority identity such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. One of the common treatments found with most participants interviewed was the presence of therapeutic treatments in the past, present, or hopes for the future. The three main themes found when
exploring mental health with participant were: (a) acknowledging the presence of mental health and (b) sibling similar mental health and (c) the assistance of therapy.

Acknowledging the Presence of Mental Health

Many participants reported coming from families that did not discuss or properly communicate mental health to them during their upbringings. It wasn’t until they came out or both siblings being out as LGB that mental health was even acknowledged. Furthermore, many participants reported having negative mental health outcomes but it “not necessarily” being tied to their sexual minority statuses. For example, Peter reported:

I have generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), but I am not sure if it is tied to my sexual identity. Ummm… It really spiked when I was going through my first serious breakup and I would have anxiety attacks often. I still do to an extent have them, but it’s gotten much better. I wonder if it is tied to being gay or if it is something I have. It runs in my family on both of my parent’s side, but they have never reached out for help like I have. I feel like my generation is living in a time where the stigma of mental health isn’t as strong which is why we are communicating more freely and seeking the help we need sooner.

Participants also reported that being a “double minority” made their mental health more difficult to manage. For example, Chris, who is black, and a gay man stated:

Well, I am in therapy just to have an outlet to talk. I would rather talk about the difficulties going on than just ignore them, you know? I do not have suicidal ideation, but I have bouts of depression and anxiety. That’s pretty normal, right? I mean being a minority is hard let alone being a double monitory and even though I haven’t had the most difficult time doesn’t mean every day is easy.
As stated before, participant’s negative mental health outcomes were not only because of their sexual minority’s status, but because of how they were treated by their families because of their LGB identity. Taylor stated:

I don’t have depression and anxiety because I am gay. My parents threw me out of the house at 16 because I am gay which led to me having anxiety and depression. There’s a difference. I have more mental health outcomes because of my family not because of being gay. I have depression which creeps up here and there. My anxiety isn’t horrible. I’ve never thought of killing myself though. Being kicked out of the house at such an impressionable age made me do things I now as an adult regret but that is because of the lack of guidance that was taken away from me which led me to do those things.

Participants reported that their siblings are one of few people they can discuss mental health with in a “gentle” way. For example, Alex reported:

When you know someone who you can be open with about mental health and understand on a level where they won’t be judgmental is very important. Your sibling being that person who can relate and understand you. My sibling is very good at not judging me and I can fall in the hole of judging myself for judging myself and they are always the person to say, “just be gentle with yourself” so my sibling is the first person I turn to for moments when I am not feeling mentally well.

Participants also reported around their sibling being one of few people they can disclose their mental health issues with but also mental health being a topic that made their relationship and communication grow stronger. Bob reported:

I have always been vocal about my mental health concerns with my sister and now we have an open dialogue. Like for example, I don’t think she would have told me she was
on antidepressants unless we were in a place to talk about things more and willing to tell me those things which is nice.

Some participants shared their experiences processing negative mental health with their siblings and how impactful that time has been. Kristen shared:

He has unequivocally been supportive of me from moment number one and if you would interview him, I would hope he’d say the same. He has struggled pretty significantly with depression and anxiety since college and he hasn’t always been comfortable sharing that struggle with my parents and I was the only one he was speaking to about it so I think it is true for both of us both ways.

Sibling Similar Mental Health

Many participants reported around their sibling’s having similar negative mental health outcomes in childhood, adolescence, and/or later in adulthood. Some participants stated that it was “helpful” for them to go through this with someone else because they weren’t alone in their feelings or gave them hope when they were “at their worst with mental health” that they could “get out of it” because they saw their sibling persist. For example, Walt shared:

Recently he was talking about how much happier he. 5 years ago he had pretty serious suicidal thoughts and he was struggling for a while which I knew but not about the suicidal thoughts so I think we had similar struggles we helped each other out with.

Walt went on to report that if he would have had a closer relationship with his sibling in terms of communication, there would not have been as strong of negative mental health outcomes. He reported:

I have had negative mental health outcomes over the years but there is also this part of me that thinks if I had more of that support from my brother or if we were just were
connected more, I probably wouldn’t have done as poorly with my depression and anxiety.

Participants also discussed the importance of both having mental health issues and how if one didn’t, there would still be support, but since both do, there is a presence of empathy. Greg shared:

I have had a history of mental health issues such as PTSD and an anxiety disorder and so I struggled but for the majority of our lives, my sibling has had more mental health issues. They were suicidal when they first started college and so when we moved in together, part of it was just to make sure they were okay, but it was also really nice to have them around and I think it is a commonality that builds understanding and makes it easier to connect on that. If one of us didn’t have mental health issues we would still support each other but that empathy of course helps.

Participants also reported that there is an increase in closeness and understanding of mental health not for having the same exact mental health outcomes, but for having mental health outcomes in general. For example, Ella shared:

I have a personality disorder and teachers have contacted my parents about my sibling saying, “Hey you should talk to him because he is saying things that may mean he’s depressed.” It has helped in the sense of I will go to therapy and pick up communication skills to learn how to communicate effectively in a professional setting and I can use that with communicating with anybody including my sibling. We are good at sensing each other’s moods because we are both emotional people like he knows when to stop asking questions when I am feeling something particular even though he loves asking questions and I know when he is getting frustrated and when to do something else. A lot of
empathy is present with emotion and we can tell there is a mental health thing going on so we can change courses.

Participants also reported the importance of discussing mental health with their siblings because of negative mental health outcomes running in their families and having their siblings there to relate and talk with. Jill shared:

If I ever had a problem surrounding my sexuality, I would go to her as one of the first people to talk to. A lot of my family, depression and mental health, my family has issues with it, so I guess I would be comfortable going to her especially with us both being bisexual. There are also more rates of suicidal ideation amongst LGBT people so it’s important to talk about.

The Assistance of Therapy

Therapy was a common practice throughout most participants. Every participant interviewed had either been in therapy in the past, was currently in treatment, or wanted to know more about the process to possibly try it in the future. Common narratives of the positive outcomes that came with therapy were the open outlets to discuss anything, a space to talk to an unbiased perspective, and allowance of feelings to be felt. For example, Nick stated:

I have been in therapy which has been amazing. I recently moved so I lost my therapist, but we check in time in time again. It was wonderful to have a space to speak freely about whatever was harming me that week and not have negative outcomes come from it. My family isn’t one to talk about their feelings or impact, so it was nice to be in a space that we can do that. I am also on an antidepressant/anxiety medication that is also helping me.
Alex discussed his number one most important aspect of his therapeutic experiences which is support. He stated:

I find the number one thing I am looking for is a therapist who is supportive of me, I am not always looking to be challenged so support is always my top thing. I need someone to talk to who is not involved in the events and doesn’t have an emotional attachment and express support. That is very important to me.

Going along the lines with the need for a supportive environment for LGBT individuals to thrive in therapy, Bob reported his first experience coming in for one problem but using it for a different reason. He shared:

The first time I went to therapy originally was because my step mother abused me and we went to try and fix that relationship and I would use those sessions to literally talk about being a lesbian. That was my space and I could talk about what I wanted to talk about. So I turned a negative experience into a positive one because that therapist was supportive of my LGBT identity even though my stepmom wasn’t.

Some participants even reported the positives of therapy even when they didn’t like the therapist or everything having to do with the therapeutic process. Having those outlets were helpful regardless of the individual providing that outlet. Taylor stated:

I guess just speaking with someone with no adjusting. I could literally say whatever was on my mind and not have it be judged or thrown back into my face. Clearly something I am not used to coming from the family I came from. Still felt a little weird because I wasn’t a huge fan of his but whatever. Tried to find the positive.

Some participants reported that a similar sexual identity was not necessary to have in a therapist to see compelling work. Amy reported:
Therapy has helped with my sexuality in that like, I have a straight therapist which I thought I wasn’t going to like but I actually kind of like it and she… never talks about my sexuality so I get to go in and talk about the women in my life and it’s just super typical. It’s not a big deal, nothing like that. I have never really talked about sexuality in my therapy because I have a lot of support. I’m really lucky.

Some participants reported that for the parents normalizing therapy from when they were very young helped demystify the stigma which then didn’t prevent them for seeking treatment when in adulthood. Kristen shared:

My parents took us to therapy around second or third grade so when we were very young, and the counselor understood what adoption was and us as a family processing that through. So, having a relationship with counselors and therapy was something that I would say, from my parents, normalizing that when we were younger was a really important step.

Lastly, some participants reported that the therapist having a differing sexual identity was difficult for them but was still vital to their recovery or therapeutic outcomes. Summer reported:

I see a therapist who is progressive and not queer. I kind of wish I was seeing a therapist who was queer. I remember saying something like “there are not lesbians here” and she tried to argue with me and it was too bad that she was my therapist and I had to explain this huge part of my life to her and she doesn’t really understand anything beyond that, but I will say she has been great and my therapy has been vital to who I am today and grateful that I have been able to have a therapist like her.
Summary

With the increase of negative mental health outcomes for LGB individuals (Finlay & Walther, 2003), it is essential to explore these outcomes and examine impacts the family and specifically the sibling relationship have had on their mental health. First, many participants found the recognition of mental health was helpful through their process of coming out and later in life (9 participants). Participants recalled having anxiety and depression tied to not only their sexual minority statuses, but also major life experience not necessarily tied to their LGB identity. Second, siblings having a shared mental health background was found to make them grow closer in terms of relatedness and compassion for one another (8 participants). Lastly, therapeutic treatment was found in all participants interviewed as something they have tried, are currently practicing, or an aspect wanting to be explored for future practices (21 participants). Positive outcomes of therapy included a space to talk freely, an unbiased perspective to share with, and allowing participants to “feel feelings.”

Power Balances

Working off a feminist theory framework, the presence of power was a common role with many participants interviewed. Power has been found by scholars to play an influential role in familial relationships and interactions such as the sibling bond (Few-Demo, Lloyd, & Allen, 2014). Extent literature has expressed power based on age, the older sibling projecting dominating behaviors towards their younger siblings (Alekseeva, Kozlova, Baskaeva, & Pyankova, 2014) however, this study examined the presence of power based on the order both siblings came out to their families. Within the context of the LGB identity, it is important to explore if identifying as a sexual minority lowers the presence of power or intimidation and increases closeness between the dyad regardless of birth order or coming out order. Siblings
reported various perceptions of the role power played within their sibling relationships with responses varying from power being used as a protector role to the projection of power preventing them from being closer. The two overarching themes found were (a) reciprocal power and (b) only room for one.

**Reciprocal Power**

For participants interviewed for this study, they described the use of power within their sibling relationship as something that felt reciprocal. Participants reported that the power used was a give-and-take by a back and forth of information, use of influence, and/or working off protective instincts. For example, Chris who is a first out sibling reported that he used his “power” for good because it gave him the courage to connect and confront his sibling on anything. He reported:

I do remember a conversation we had around him being gay and I could tell he was nervous. I remember thinking in the moment, “why are you nervous to talk to me? We talk every day.” He is 6 years younger than I am so as the bigger brother I felt comfortable to confront him on anything. It is weird to say it like that because I don’t think it feels the same for him. Then when he finally told my mom, I think she was just like “okay neither of you are straight. That’s fine let’s keep it moving.” I guess I felt comfortable to confront him as well because I knew nothing bad would come from him coming out but when you are in that place you don’t know what will happen, so I get it.

Aligning with extent literature, the older sibling taking a protective role while growing up through developmental stages (Diener, Anderson, Wright, & Dunn, 2015) was also present with participants interviewed. For example, Brian stated:
She is my little sister so there's always going to be that protective side that I will have. I have had that all through our upbringings. Even as adults I still feel it. There is a part of me that still thinks I need to teach her things, you know?

Brian also went on to state that as his sister’s “protector” he is also conscious of the differing experiences sexual minorities have based on gender. He explains:

There are things to teach her and protect her from that are not just gay things I suppose. And it is also important to keep in mind that she is a lesbian and not a gay man like me. Both sexual minorities but two different experiences. We talk about that often and I think with age the protector side is coming down and I’m letting this guard down. But growing up it was definitely present.

Caleb reported that his sibling’s influence was a power projection that wasn’t always taken in a negative way. He reported:

He exerts more influence in the power department. He has to learn to be that way because of hiding his identity longer and has that kind of intimidating kind of way of talking. He uses his age and experience to exert that but also the fact that there is more acceptance of LGB people and still in that mindset which isn’t always bad.

Some participants expressed that the constant seeking of approval holds power over them which is most likely unintentional from their sibling. Alex reported:

The first thing that comes to mind is that I have always really looked up to my older sibling so even through the coming out process I was looking for their acceptance and support. And also, their approval. And so, I think that has a certain power. And like telling me who I am, right? It really all comes back to that approval which I am still guilty of.
Some participants reported around how they used their power to their advantage to communicate and be around their sibling who tended to be shyer and more reserved. For example, Kristen shared:

My brother is much more shy, reserved and timid so he has always had a more common shy lean whereas I am very open, outgoing and the person that in school got in trouble for talking too much so yeah. So, if you chatted with him, he would probably say that he didn’t have the power. He wasn’t setting the agenda or deciding what we were doing, it was typically me so it wasn’t until late high school that he started to have his own identity that he was comfortable with.

Participants reported a power imbalance based on age and experience of the sibling pairings. Summer shared:

I think there is definitely a power difference. Age difference. Not only with age but also culturally that the first sibling is supposed to care for the younger sibling that automatically sets up a structure of “you are the one in charge/you are the one babysitting/watching out for your sibling. I think that it is definitely applicable to my sibling relationship when we were younger and I hope it hasn’t had a negative effect on her. Today we are incredibly supportive and love each other and I hope that dynamic is less prominent in our relationship.

Lastly, participants reported that the power they held when they were younger, declines with time and age to a more reciprocal relationship. Greg stated:

I used to be the mean sibling who wanted nothing to do with my sibling and as we have gotten older it has shifted a bit because I for the longest time they were the more domineering one and so within the last five years there has been in a shift in control. My
sibling is now the cool popular one and now since I am older, going out isn’t healthy. I am in a comfortable balance of not needing to go out too often. Our default is I take change but that has definitely softened to the point of neutrality. There used to be a crisis and I would take control and now it is more of a conversation. It isn’t me what’s deciding what’s best, its both of us because we trust each other’s judgment.

Laurent also discussed how with time; the power imbalance seemed to lower when he shared:

I don’t actively find ways to seek out power regardless of us being gay and we are only a year and a half apart so if he’d been a lot younger, I think that could have been more of a chance of me being like “okay no. I am much older, I know better. I will help you though this life.” So since he is only a year and half younger, and again we had already discussed how different paths in life so far through high school, I found him more as an equal seeing it like “you need to do what you need to do” because he knows the most about himself so I think our close age also helped dispel any power dynamics that might have gone down.

Ella shared her experiences with providing information as a source of power for her younger LGB sibling and how that changes her relationship with him compared to other siblings at home. She reported:

I think he views me as sometimes a source of information. Like if he has a question about sexual identity, he knows I have an LGBT lens, so he knows where to consult. I also feel like with my other siblings who are not LGB, they look for approval more than my LGB brother does, and I think the birth order holds a lot of sway. There is power in influence over younger siblings and training them to not be homophobic proves that and at the
same time I don’t feel like my LGB brother would ever withhold information form me that he thinks would change my perception of him whereas my non LGB brother would.

**Only Room for One**

Many participants interviewed reported that the power that was projected onto them from their siblings came in the form of “always coming off like they know better when they don’t,” “saying whatever they want,” and “not giving enough credit to other sibling.” Some participants reported that there seemed to be a power imbalance and that it felt one sided. It is also important to report that all participants who reported being “frustrated” by the power imbalance present in their sibling relationship were second out siblings. For example, Peter shared his experience feeling like his first out sibling refuses to disclose vulnerabilities to him because he does not want to seem like a “weak leader.” He stated:

I am the younger one out of the two of us and looking back on it now I look at it like it is a classic sibling relationship. The older sibling projecting power onto the younger sibling all through childhood and with time, that power becomes less powerful into adulthood and doesn’t have as strong of an impact, which then leaves the older sibling feeling powerless, discouraged, and confused as to where the relationship is without that power. Like when a villain in a movie loses their superpowers and the good guy’s kindness prevails… I don’t mean to paint my brother like a villain because I don’t think it was his intention to do that but that really is what it feels like.

Other participants reported that as time and age progressed, the power that siblings had over the others seemed “unnecessary” and prevented the relationship to grow or even sustain. Hayden stated:
I think him being older was a power trip. Which was helpful when I was younger, but as an adult I don’t find it necessary. I think he feels like he can say whatever he wants and there not to be consequences and now there is. And anytime I try to do that he gets upset and shuts down. Which then makes it difficult to sustain a close relationship. I am curious of what will come in the years to come when we are both in our thirties and him seeing that he can’t boss me around like he always has. There are times where I think he still sees me as a fourteen-year-old that can be pushed around and bossed around.

Some participants interviewed explained how the projection of power has stayed with them even into adulthood and how impressionable developmental stages have left a lasting impact. Stephanie reported:

I was a very impressionable kid (audible laugh). I would be the most gullible, hearing things and jumping to believing them. My brother would always tease me about monsters under the bed and I am not kidding I think I believed it until I moved out of my parent’s house. I guess the hearing and jumping to believing thing in my head stays with me because it plays a role in my self-consciousness. Not that I was teased or still am but I do care a lot about how people see me so if I hear the most mildly negative thing I exasperate it in my head and I believe it.

**Summary**

Following extent literature, siblings within this study were also found to show dominating behaviors during developmental stages of their upbringings (Alekseeva, Kozlova, Baskaeva, & Pyankova, 2014). First, power was examined as an aspect that was more reciprocal and positive showing siblings using their power to be a protective of one another and having the confidence to discuss whatever was needed regardless of birth order or order of coming out as
LGB (7 participants). Secondly, the role power played within the sibling relationship was looked at more one sided through some sibling’s perspective sharing aspects like “power trip” and “projection of power” which have shown difficulty in sustaining and growing the relationship because of dominating behaviors in adulthood (8 participants).

**DISCUSSION**

**Overview of Study**

The findings of this qualitative examination represent new discoveries and perceptions of LGB individuals and their families. Unique to this study was examining if sibling allies exist when more than one LGB sibling is out within the family system, specifically exploring the impact that a sibling ally has negative mental health symptoms/processes. A phenomenological approach was utilized to gain a more understanding of the lived experiences of being LGB and having a sibling who identifies as LGB. Seventy-five individuals participated in the online Qualtrics survey and twenty-one of those individuals engaged in an over the phone interview. The research questions that guided this study were: (a) What are the sibling dynamic/interaction changes within the system when more than one child is LGB? (b) What are the lived experiences of lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) individuals who have siblings who also identify as LGB? (c) How does having an LGB sibling influence mental health symptoms/processes? (d) Do LGB siblings perceive their siblings as an ally? If so, how?

Five overarching themes were found and explored in detail which are (a) lived experiences, (b) family system dynamic changes, (c) the sibling as an ally, (d) mental health perceptions, and (e) the role power played within the sibling relationship. These themes will be discussed at length as they relate to current extent literature and the theoretical foundation set in
place. Limitations to this study are discussed along with clinical implications for mental health professionals working with this community and future research directions.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question #1: Family Dynamic Changes

It was found through some participants that family dynamics changed once both siblings were out as LGB. Following the work of Trahan & Goodrich (2015), there are unique disclosure processes (coming out) that influence future family dynamics. For example, someone who voluntarily came out to family members as opposed to being outed was found to have an increase in communication throughout the family versus someone who was outed or didn’t come out to family members had no change or decline in closeness within the family system. It is important to point out that just because there was no change found does not assume that it was for negative reasons. Some participants reported that there was already an accepting narrative to LGB individuals due to other family members coming out before them. Another aspect that makes this study differ from others was the inclusion of education on LGB individuals to the other family members once both siblings came out. Bornstein (2018) discusses the times when children begin teaching the parents and reported family engagement as the number one tool to encourage family cohesion and closeness. Not only were there dynamic changes found between parents and children, but also ones found between the sibling dyads.

Research Question #2: Lived Experience

Building off Barrow’s (2014) work, witnessing the first out sibling’s experience with coming out to family members influenced how the second out sibling was going to move forward or take a step back with their process. Many second out siblings expressed that their parent’s reaction to their sibling’s coming out experience influenced them to either come out to
them comfortably or restrict themselves from coming out to them fully. Additionally, going along with Barrow’s study comes the parent’s shift in perception once one sibling was out to adjust their behaviors accordingly to “improve” their reactions to sustain family cohesiveness. It is essential to keep in mind that every person’s coming out experiences differ even when they belong to the same family. Regardless of growing up in the same home with the same parents, participants in this study expressed difficulties that their siblings didn’t experience such as some having to pave a path that has never been taken, feelings of taking something that didn’t belong to them, and cultural influences such as religion, race, and being a part of athletics that made it difficult to come out.

**Research Question #3 & #4: Sibling Ally and Mental Health**

Similarly, to previous literature exploring mental health outcomes of LGB individuals (Russell & Joyner 2001; Safren and Heimberg 1999), participants in this study expressed having negative mental health outcomes such as depressive symptoms, anxiety attacks, and suicidal ideation. Some participants also related their mental health to their sexual identity due to having a stigmatized and marginalized identity, supporting Rosario and colleagues (2002) study. What makes this study differ from others is the ally role a sibling with a similar minority identity takes to help lower those negative mental symptoms. This study found that there is an important difference between an ally and being close. What helps define the differences between the two is that an ally has consistent communication around their support and a close sibling does not. The majority of participants found their siblings to be allies. Furthermore, another assistant to help lower negative mental health symptoms was the presence of therapy. All clients, except for one, have been in or are currently in therapy. This leaves important clinical implications for mental health professionals working with the LGBT community.
Theory: Power balances

Taking into consideration throughout the entire study, childbirth order played an important role in the perception of sibling relationships and closeness. As stated previously, the order to which participants came out to their families was also examined to see if power played a role in their relationship. Along with the work of Alekseeva, Kozlova, Baskaeva, & Pyankova, (2014), this study also found the impact some older (first out siblings) tended to project dominating behavior toward their second out siblings. Second out siblings were also found to be heavily influenced by their emotional closeness for help or approval from their first out siblings. There is also evidence to support through this study that identifying as a sexual minority does decline the intimidation of power but not for all and increases closeness between the dyad regardless of birth order. Multiple participants reported that because of their sexual minority identities it made intimidation and projection of power declines due to the relatability and mutual struggle through developmental periods. Taking a feminist theoretical approach allows me to challenge perspective on gender inequality but also utilize important subsets of a feminist lens such as discrimination, oppression, and power. Feminist theory suggests that if power dynamics shift within the family, that does not necessarily lead to dysfunction. With participants within this study discussing that through both sibling coming out as LGB, the family not only increased communication but involved the inclusion of education from children to parents. Showing, that power can go back and forth between parents and children and still sustain a proper hierarchy and functional system.

Clinical Implications

This study has important clinical implications for therapeutic professionals working with LGB individuals or siblings within a therapeutic context. First, there has been and always will be
an important need for clinicians of all kinds to educate themselves on the lived experiences of sexual minorities. Within the ever-evolving therapeutic profession, it is pertinent for clinicians, educators, and researchers to sustain a level of continuing education when working with the LGBT community to fully resonate and comprehend life shifts such as the coming out process. As expressed by some participates, mental health professionals teaching techniques to properly communicate mental health to sexual minorities and their families is of the upmost importance to see a decline in these negative mental health outcomes. By having mental health be a topic discussed within a systems context, it not only reinforces the family support for the LGB individual, it also establishes effective communication for future hardships and resiliencies.

When in therapy with multiple LGB sibling families, it is essential to assess the parental relationships between all siblings present and assess the relationship between siblings. As expressed before, just because they come from the same family background, does not mean they have similar coming out experiences and comforts within the family. Having every perspective heard within the room to all family members helps with every member being on the same page and does not lead with assumptions on individual’s experiences. Because the sibling relationship has not been found to be strongly empirically supported yet by literature or theory, having therapists take a curious and creative stance is necessary to find effective assessment questions and tools regardless of theoretical background.

This study has shown that a similar sexual minority status for the therapist is not necessary to see supportive and helpful work. The findings also fall in line with extent literature on sexual minorities not seeking therapy because they are sexual minorities, but for other stressors going on in their lives not necessarily pertaining to their sexual identity. (DeAngelis, 2002). Alessi et al., (2015) discusses the presence of more affirmative attitudes within mental
health professionals are linked with higher levels of affirmative therapy and positive beliefs, which in turn positively influence the therapist’s and client’s engagement and practice regardless of the therapist sexual identity. Furthermore, following the work of McGeorge, Stone, and Carlson (2011), It is important for affirmative therapists to understand the impacts of heterosexism on the mental health of LGB individuals.

The importance of the sibling subsystem should not be a relationship that is overlooked or ignored in family studies moving forward. As previously stated in extent literature, the sibling relationship is one of the most underutilized relationships in the field of family studies, (Whitman et al 2012) however, the findings of this study clearly indicate the substantial role siblings play in the context of the LGBT community. As many participants reported, their siblings were their main sources of support and allegiance throughout their coming out process and later into adulthood. Furthermore, participants recalled navigating their negative mental health outcomes as a lot more “manageable” and “relatable” due to their similar family systems and coming out processes. Families could benefit from interventions used by mental health professionals utilizing and beginning with the sibling relationship to provide less projection of power and more closeness within members.

Therapists should also keep in mind the importance of family dynamic changes within the system when members come out as LGB. Specifically, challenging the roles an expectations that have been placed upon each member and adjusting accordingly not matter what gender or sexual orientation is disclosed. Going along with the work of Luepnitz (1988), creating a space for clients to examine their assumptions about what it means to have power within the family system and the importance of adjusting those assumptions throughout their lives is essential for family cohesiveness. This study found an increase in family communication and education when
both siblings came out. Having clients recognize the power they have within themselves has been found to increase self-confidence and pride (Branden, 2011) and the same can be applied to multiple LGB sibling families.

**Limitations**

Though there are many strengths to this study, limitations are worthy of discussion. First, demographics of the participants interviewed, though diverse in age and gender, were not racially diverse with the majority of participants identifying as white/Caucasian. The presence of racial representation has the potential to lead to other themes and findings. All attempts were made for more multicultural representation but only white individuals (with the exception of one) engaged for an over the phone interview. Having the majority of the sample be from the same Midwest area plays a role in this limitation. There was also limited data collection advertisements presented. Finding other ways of advertisement could have led to a more geographically represented sample.

This study explored the individual perspective: however interviewing sibling dyads has the potential to show more depth and knowledge of the experiences to examine and discrepancies or differing viewpoints about the same family (Creswell, 2013). Interviewing only one person allows for the participant to discuss freely and candidly about their perceptions and experiences growing up with their LGB sibling which can be seen as both negative and positive experiences (Saldana, 2015). Interviews were restricted to over the phone as opposed to in person or video conferencing calls. Examining nonverbal communication would have added more analysis to the project presented. The cross-sectional design plays a limitation being that the participants were interviewed at one single time point in their life with questions revolving around past and present experiences. As time progressed, perceptions have potential to change and if these participants
had follow up interviews in a year’s time, answers could shift causing more findings to be located.

**Future Directions**

Though this study builds or knowledge of sibling relationships when more than one child comes out as LGB, examining both siblings has yet to be explored. By examining both, analysis could include matching of perspectives and clarity that could have recourses on how to sustain or grow the sibling relationship that has a history of relational tears due to the projection of power imbalances and differing perspectives. Future research could focus on the dyadic perspective to show parallels and discrepancies with participants and their sibling’s responses. Having a dyadic perspective could also help examine if both siblings see the family dynamic changes that occur once both are out or if it is only recognized by one and how to work with that imbalance in therapy.

Future research could also focus on the sibling ally relationship within the transgender population. Some participants within this study identified as transgender and found their families had more difficulty with their gender identity compared to their sexual orientation. Extent literature has found that 40% of transgender individuals attempt suicide at least once compared to the rate of the general population being 5% (Williams, 2017). By exploring the sibling ally within the transgender community, there is potential to see a decline in negative mental health outcomes and suicidal ideation from one of the highest suicide rated population.

Finally, future literature can focus more on the sibling relationship as a strong support system within the family system. With studies showing that the sibling relationship is one of the most understudied populations within family studies (Whitman et al 2012), it is essential for researchers to examine of minoritized populations and examine to see if the sibling relationship
can also help lower negative mental health outcomes and increase sibling closeness. Based off of this study’s findings, the sibling relationship has played a “crucial” role in the LGB participant’s lives in terms of support systems through difficult times, allegiance when no one else is, and teammate not only within their family but through life in general. By having more literature focus primarily on the sibling relationship, there is potential to see mental health outcomes lower, increase in effective communication throughout the family, and an ally present regardless of their sexual orientation.
Chapter 4
DISCUSSIONS & CONCLUSIONS

INTRODUCTION

The topic of multiple LGB sibling families is one that has followed my academic career consistently and is one that hits very close to home. I remember going through my sexuality exploration phase when I was 18 years old and heading to college. Seeing the whole world that was ahead of me with a multitude of avenues to take. It wasn’t until I found my passion for family studies when I was in my third year of undergrad that I realized the powerful influence the family system can have on individuals. There is so much more to a family than just the composition of its members. There are unspoken strengths waiting to be recognized, vulnerabilities as deep as a cavernous valley, and perspectives that don’t always get the credit they deserve. As stated, I too come from a multiple LGB sibling family like the participants interviewed for this study. I have clear memories of learning what the college library database was and searching for literature on my family system and coming up short. My family also experienced a shift in family dynamics in terms of improved communication and comfort with vulnerability which wasn’t present before we came out. I learned very quickly that we were a family that wasn’t necessarily unique, but one that was not expressed openly by others both socially and in research.

When I tell people that I am a gay man and my brother is as well, I am met with three different reactions: (a) “I didn’t know families like that existed,” (b) “What was that like?” and (c) “I know someone from similar family system.” From day one of conducting this study, I was not worried about finding the 10-12 participants needed to meet saturation. However, I was pleasantly surprised and did not expect that number to double within days of publishing the search for participants. Once I had my participants, I was incredibly eager to start the process of
interviewing and hearing people’s stories of their experience since this idea and topic has been one that has followed me now for over five years. The transference I felt while interviewing the participants was strong. I realized that I disclosed I was also a member of a multiple LGB sibling family to all participants interviewed but at different times. I would disclose anytime they referred to a similar experience or anytime parallel emotions were brought up that had me resonate with them on a different level. As individuals shared their stories, there was a diverse range of vulnerable emotions being expressed and humorous moments worthy of capturing an audible laugh that I would write in my reflexive journal and make a note of while transcribing.

Chapter 2 of this dissertation was inspired by the discomforting emotions I felt when I realized my family system is not properly represented in literature. Seeing how these families existed within researcher’s data, yet no study at the time explored this system’s lived experiences. It wasn’t until Barrow (2014) that this topic was even touched upon. Chapter 3 is the discovery of other people’s lived experiences when having more than one sexual minority child within the system. What makes this study differ from others is the focus of the sibling allegiance seeing if the potential negative mental health outcomes to lower with the strong sibling closeness. What makes this study stand out theoretically from others is the feminist family theory lens applied. Examining the role of power and seeing if the presence of multiple LGB siblings lowered the projection of dominating behaviors.

As a therapist who works with this family system, there are important clinical implications to keep in mind when working with the LGB population, the sibling relationship, and multiple LGB sibling families. I practice utilizing Integrative Systemic Therapy (IST) as my primary model of therapy. This framework allows the therapist to assess clients accordingly, take a collaborative approach when creating goals and objectives for treatment, highlight constraints
to achieving goals, and psycho educate the client of problem sequences and how to form solution sequences. Future research directions, clinical implications for marriage and family therapists and therapists utilizing IST will be discussed at length in this chapter.

**SUMMARY OF ARTICLES**

To address research question number one, the first article within the dissertation is titled *The Family and Sibling Dynamic Changes When Two or More Children in the Family Come out at Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual (LGB): A Systematic Review*. This study is a conceptual piece focusing on the interactions and dynamic changes when more than one child comes out as LGB. This review seeks to investigate literature examining the sibling and parent dynamic changes when more than one sibling within the system comes out as LGB minorities, and to contribute to the lack of literature that depicts multiple LGB identified sibling families. Methods for the review included an evaluation of three different databases with specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. The systematic review included: (a) literature on the family dynamics, sibling relationship, and LGBT individuals, (b) methodological approaches (screening, examining, and locating articles to fit the review), (c) results found within examination of articles, (d) and clinical implications pertaining to findings. Furthermore, a family systems theory lens was utilized to explore family dynamics and multidimensional relationships found throughout family systems. Results indicated a presence of these families existing through the participants interviewed when exploring the sibling relationship, however 3 out of the 4 studies do not explore the topic at hand. Results indicated that when a second child within the family comes out as LGB, it gives those parents an opportunity to improve their responses compared to possible negative reactions parents gave from the first child’s sexual minority disclosure (Borrow, 2014), however no literature was found examining the sibling closeness or mental health outcomes.
Addressing the remaining three research questions, the second article within the dissertation is titled *Exploring Mental Health Outcomes and Sibling Allies of Families with More than one Child Identifying as Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual: A Qualitative Study*. This study utilized qualitative methodology to examine the following research questions: (a) What are the lived experiences of multiple LGB sibling families, (b) how does having an LGB sibling influence mental health symptoms/processes, and (c) do LGB siblings perceive their siblings as an ally. Detailed over the phone interviews provided rich insights on sibling closeness, coping strategies with negative mental health symptoms, and if the role of an ally is played with the sibling. With little known research about multiple LGB sibling families, individuals who come out as LGB with a lack of allies are found to have increased risks of negative mental health outcomes such as depressive symptoms, anxiety disorders, and suicidal ideation (Russell & Joyner, 2001).

Furthermore, the purpose of this study was twofold: (a) to further examine the sibling relationship when there is more than one sibling identifies as LGB by addressing relevant gaps in the literature provided and (b) provide in depth over the phone interviews of LGB individuals utilizing a Feminist theoretical foundation to further understand results and implications. Results from this qualitative study include major differences of lived experiences based on order the siblings came out with family dynamic changes to improve family cohesion. Participants also reported viewing their siblings as allies which played a role in helping with negative mental health symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. This study also utilized a feminist family theory lens and found a decline in power projection once both siblings were out.

**SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDIES**

The studies that are outlined in this dissertation are important because they examine and seek to find a richer understanding of multiple LGB sibling families and the mental health
outcomes that arise from having more than one sexual minority within the family system. With the inclusion of a feminist theory lens, this study provides a deeper comprehension of the sibling relationship and the importance of this dyad within a minoritized group. Before now, studies have lacked to depict the negative mental health outcomes of families with more than one LGB sibling and the assumption of a sibling ally to increase quality of life and sibling closeness. The studies in this dissertation focused on the sibling relationship when more than one sibling identifies as LGB and the experiences sibling face within this unique family system. As a result of these studies and the use of theory, implications for clinicians and researchers include (a) continued research on the sibling relationship and the LGBT community, (b) developing a closer understanding of the importance of the sibling relationship within minoritized groups, and (c) assist in bringing the sibling relationship and LGBT community into stronger research representations.

**DISCUSSION**

**Clinical Implications for marriage and family therapists**

This dissertation provides important clinical implications for marriage and family therapists (MFTs) working with LGB individuals or siblings within a therapeutic context. First, there has been and always will be an important need for MFTs to educate themselves on the lived experiences of sexual minorities. Within the ever-evolving therapeutic profession, it is pertinent for clinicians, educators, and researchers to sustain a level of continuing education when working with the LGBT community to fully resonate and comprehend life shifts such as the coming out process (pre and post). As expressed by some participates, MFTs should provide teaching techniques to properly communicate mental health to sexual minorities and their families to see a decline in these negative mental health outcomes. This implication is not limited
to just the LGBT community, but within all communities. By having mental health be a topic discussed by MFTs within a systems context it not only reinforces the family support for the individuals and families you are working with, it also establishes effective communication for future hardships and resiliencies the system will go through in the future.

This dissertation has shown that a similar sexual minority status (lesbian, gay, or bisexual) for the MFT’s is not necessary to see supportive and helpful work. The findings in this dissertation also fall in line with extent literature on sexual minorities not seeking therapy because they are sexual minorities, but for other stressors going on in their lives not necessarily pertaining to their sexual identity. (DeAngelis, 2002). Furthermore, following the work of McGeorge, Stone, and Carlson (2011), it is important for MFT’s to understand the impacts of heterosexism on the mental health of LGB individuals. Heterosexism is defined as individuals who are prejudice against those that are not heterosexual. Burn, Kadlec, & Rexer, (2005) explained that heterosexism plays a role in the antigay stigma and harassment LGBT individuals face regularly and that offensiveness is associated with the decreased likelihood of LGBT individuals coming out to their friends and families. If MFTs provide the safe space, practice their systemic midframe, and be conscious of heterosexism in and outside of the therapy room there is potential to show an increase in the likelihood of coming out comfortably and a decline in those same negative mental health outcomes.

The importance of the sibling subsystem should not be a relationship that is overlooked or ignored in family studies moving forward. As previously stated in extent literature, the sibling relationship is one of the most underutilized relationships in the field of family studies, (Whitman et al 2012) however, the findings of this study clearly indicate the substantial role siblings play in the context of the LGBT community. As many participants reported, their
siblings were their main sources of support and allegiance throughout their coming out process and later into adulthood. Furthermore, participants recalled navigating their negative mental health outcomes as a lot more “manageable” and “relatable” with their siblings due to their same family systems and coming out processes. Families could benefit from interventions used by MFTs in family therapy beginning with the sibling relationship to show support and allegiance of not just parents present but the siblings as well. MFTs compared to other mental health professionals have the advantage of working with a systemic mind frame within family therapy to highlight what is in and outside of the room, take into considerations every person’s perspective, and apply the strengths found to garner solutions to presenting problems.

**Clinical Implication for marriage and family therapists utilizing an Integrative Systemic Therapy (IST) Approach**

Integrative Systemic therapy (IST) is a therapeutic perspective that provides a comprehensive systemic framework for individuals, couples, and families (Pinsof et al., 2018). IST is integrative of all models of therapy and uses a systemic lens, meaning it draws upon concepts, strategies, and interventions from a multitude of theoretical frameworks (Pinsof et al., 2018; Lebow, 2016) while at the same time allowing families to understand how one member can impact the whole system (Pinsof et al., 2018). IST allows the client to explore presenting problems, constraints, and emotions through a systemic lens. This framework also provides therapists of all levels (in training, seasoned, etc.) the means to continually assess influences such as biological, psychological, and cultural factors that impact the child’s constraints and reasons for seeking treatment (Pinsof et al., 2018).

IST includes interventions such as examining client’s constraints to solutions, locating problem sequences within the individual and family, and an opportunity to explore emotions on a systemic level. When working with an IST approach, the therapist is hypothesizing systemically
about the role the family plays in the formation, maintenance, and resolution of every presenting problem (Pinsof et al., 2018). For example, if the MFT is working with a multiple LGB sibling family and there is conflict between both siblings. The identified problem sequence could include ineffective communication between parents and children around the conflict which then leads to not only the siblings fighting but the whole system in dysfunction. Throughout time in treatment, solution sequences can be created to (a) help the children feel more comfortable talking with the parents about their conflict and matching sexual identities and (b) help the parents provide a safe space for their children to open up about their similar sexual identities but what also makes them differ. The therapist is assessing and exploring the formation and outcomes of this presenting problem and actively seeking a way the family can help resolve the issue. Constraints to the solution sequence are also identified to help work past these difficulties. For example, a constraint could be a falling out of sibling closeness due to their coming out experiences being different. By exploring this constraint and getting a closer understanding of its formulation, the family can help the children find other, more healthy ways of communicating that frustration and focus in on how to improve future communication. Finally, IST’s combination of integrative and systemic approaches when working with this family allows the parents to feel closer to their children with effective communication, stronger by overcoming constraints, and more confident on how to handle other problems once they arise (Pinsof et al., 2018).

Future Directions for Research

Though this dissertation builds or knowledge of sibling relationships when more than one child comes out as LGB, examining both siblings has yet to be explored. By examining both, analysis could include matching of perspectives and clarity that could have recourses on how to
sustain or grow the sibling relationship that has a history of relational tears due to the projection of power imbalances and differing perspectives. Future research could focus on the dyadic perspective to show parallels and discrepancies with participants and their sibling’s responses. Having a dyadic perspective could also help examine if both siblings see the family dynamic changes that occur once both are out or if it is only recognized by one and how to work with that imbalance in therapy.

Future research could also focus on the sibling ally relationship within the transgender population. Some participants within this study identified as transgender and found their families had more difficulty with their gender identity compared to their sexual orientation. Extent literature has found that 40% of transgender individuals attempt suicide at least once compared to the rate of the general population being 5% (Williams, 2017). By exploring the sibling ally within the transgender community, there is potential to see a decline in negative mental health outcomes and suicidal ideation from one of the highest suicide rated population.

Finally, future literature can focus more on the sibling relationship as a strong support system within the family system. With studies showing that the sibling relationship is one of the most understudied populations within family studies (Whitman et al. 2012), it is essential for researchers to examine of minoritized populations and examine to see if the sibling relationship can also help decline negative mental health outcomes and increase sibling closeness. Based off of this study’s findings, the sibling relationship has played a “crucial” role in the LGB participant’s lives in terms of support systems through difficult times, allegiance when no one else is, and teammate not only within their family but through life in general. By having more literature focus primarily on the sibling relationship, there is potential to see mental health
outcomes lower, increase in effective communication throughout the family, and an ally present regardless of their sexual orientation.

**CONCLUSION**

Dank (1971) stated that it was his primary goal to sensitize other researchers to the importance of discovering and reporting multiple LGB sibling families because this specific family’s system provides support for theories that emphasize the importance of family relations and the etiology of LGB identity. With the completion of this dissertation we are one step closer to providing more representation of this family system within literature and showcasing the importance the sibling relationship has on LGB identified individuals. With these studies we (a) now have one study to begin proper representation of this family system and (b) supply evidence to support that when there is more than one LGB sibling, they are not only allies to each other, but they also assist in decreasing the chances or impact of negative mental health outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation/Attempts.
REFERENCES


https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=ZhxiCgAAQBAJ


APPENDICES

Appendix A: Informed Consent

Project Title: Multiple LGB Sibling Families

Principal Investigator: Casey Gamboni

Researcher Contact: Casey Gamboni- casey-gamboni@uiowa.edu

We invite you to participate in a research study being conducted by investigators from The University of Iowa. The purpose of the study is to examine the sibling relationship when more than one sibling identifies as LGB. This study will give us information regarding the specific impact the sibling relationship has on LGB individuals.

If you agree to participate, we would like you to follow on screen prompts within the Qualtrics survey to answer survey questions completed in the online survey. The survey questions vary from open-ended stories to demographic information on each participant including gender identity, ethnicity, education level completed, and sexual orientation. You are free to skip any questions that you prefer not to answer. It will take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

To help protect your confidentiality, any names that you give in the open-ended responses will be pseudonyms (i.e. fake names). All demographic and contact information will be destroyed once the transcription is sent back to you once the interview is completed and approved by you to be analyzed by the researcher.

Taking part in this research study is completely voluntary. If you do not wish to participate in this study, return the survey without answering any of the questions simply close your web browser window now or at any time before submitting the survey.

If you have questions about the rights of research subjects, please contact the Human Subjects Office, 105 Hardin Library for the Health Sciences, 600 Newton Rd, The University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA 52242-1098, (319) 335-6564, or e-mail irb@uiowa.edu.

Thank you very much for your consideration of this research study.

By selecting 'yes', you agree that you have read the informed consent document on the previous page and agree to participate in this research study.

Casey Gamboni, MS, LMFT-t
Appendix B: Pre-Interview Questionnaire

Demographic Questions:
1. What is your first name or preferred pseudonym?
2. What gender do you identify with?
3. What is your age?
4. Please specify your ethnicity.
5. What state do you live in?

These questions pertain to your LGB identity:
6. Are you out as lesbian, gay or bisexual?
7. Do you identify openly as LGB?
8. If yes, how old were you when you came out?
9. Have you noticed any negative mental health outcomes pertaining to your LGB identity?
10. Who/what are your main support systems for your sexual identity?

These questions pertain to your sibling relationship:
11. Are you close with your sibling?
12. How old were they when they came out?
13. Are you older or younger than your LGB sibling?
14. Who came out first?
Appendix C: Over the Phone Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your identity as an LGB individual?
2. Tell me about your experience having a sibling who also identifies as LGB?
3. Can you describe what your experience was like as LGB while you were growing up?
4. In what ways has your sexual identity impacted your sibling relationship?
5. Inversely, in what ways have your sibling relationship impacted your sexual identity?
   b. Who was born first?
      i. Does their age impact your perception of them?
      ii. How would you describe the power dynamics between you and your LGB sibling?
6. In what ways do you think having multiple LGB individuals in your family influences your family dynamics?
7. Do you have any negative mental health outcomes pertaining to your sexual minority status (such as depression, anxiety, or suicidal ideation)?
   c. If so, can you tell me about any mental health treatment?
   d. What was most helpful?
   e. Unhelpful?
8. Would you consider your LGB sibling to be an ally of yours?
   f. Why/Why not?
   g. If yes, how so?
   h. If yes, how does your sibling ally differ from other allies?
9. Since coming out, how has your sibling relationship changed?
10. How has your culture influenced your LGB identity and relationship with sibling?
    i. How has culture influenced your family dynamics with having more than one LGB child?
Appendix D: Initial Email

Subject line:

Participants needed: Individuals who are LGB who ALSO have an LGB sibling!

Dear Potential Research Participant,

All individuals who are 18 years or older and are lesbian, gay or bisexual who also have a sibling who also identifies as LGB are invited to participate in a study examining the lived experiences of multiple LGB sibling families. This study is being conducted by researchers in the Department of Psychological and Quantitative Foundations in the College of Education at the University of Iowa. The study involves completing a demographic questionnaire and an over the phone interview. It should take between 5-10 minutes to complete the survey and the interview after will take 45-60 minutes. If you have questions about this study, please contact the principal investigator directly at casey-gamboni@uiowa.edu. You are welcome to share this email with other individuals who are 18 years or older, are LGB, and have a sibling who identifies as LGB.

If you, or someone you know, are interested, please follow this link:

https://uiowa.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6PvM8DEYQnxGNN

Thank you,

Casey Gamboni
Appendix E: Follow Up Email

Subject line:

Participants invited: Scheduling an over the phone interview for participation in study.

Dear Potential Research Participant,

Thank you so much for completing the Qualtrics survey on multiple LGB sibling family systems. The next step is to schedule an over the phone interview. The over the phone interview will take 45-60 minutes and it will be recorded. The interview will consist of 19 open ended questions regarding your experience being LGB, your sibling relationship, mental health, and significant family dynamic changes.

To help protect your confidentiality, we will not be asking for your name or any contact information. Any names that you give in the open-ended responses are asked to use should be pseudonyms (i.e. fake names) in response. It will not be possible to link you to your responses on the survey.

If you have questions about this study, please contact the researcher directly at casey-gamboni@uiowa.edu. You are welcome to share this email with other individuals who are 18 years or older, are LGB, and have a sibling who identifies as LGB.

I look forward to hearing from you!

Thank you,

Casey Gamboni