

# **After Coming Out: Parental Acceptance of Young Lesbian and Gay People<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

This study examines extant scholarly knowledge on parental acceptance of young lesbian and gay people in traditional heteronormative families. Recent literature shows that parents generally accept their lesbian and gay children. However, parents do not always accept them immediately after they come out. Acceptance takes time, and transitioning to acceptance is often a complex process that depends on parents' access to the necessary resources for coping with the stresses of knowing that their child identifies as lesbian or gay. These resources include counseling or therapy, supportive friends and extended family, and a network of other parents with lesbian and gay children. This study also highlights the need for further research on parental acceptance in non-traditional families and of children with other non-heterosexual identities, such as asexuality, gray ace, bisexuality, or pansexuality. It also calls for an exploration of the complexities of parental acceptance as an ongoing process rather than as a singular event.

**Keywords:** family, gay, homosexuality, lesbian, parental acceptance, youth

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

*"[My parents say,] 'We totally accept you for who you are. We love you no matter what.' I'm like, that's weird because you guys come up with all these stereotypical beliefs.... When my parents say stuff like that it hits home, you know? It hurts. I know they want this like perfect little dream for me of like the American Dream, you know?... And, I'm just like, it's never going to be me. I always feel so alienated when I go home because my whole family's like that.... Just tell me that you love me no matter what, and bond, you know?"*

*-Kim, respondent, in Mena and Vaccaro (2003, p. 13)*

In the last two decades, numerous scholars studied the experiences of young lesbian and gay people<sup>1</sup> after they came out to their parents (e.g. Goodrich, 2009; Hicky & Grafsky, 2017; LaSala, 2010; Livingston & Fourie, 2016). Young lesbian and gay people often consider coming out, i.e., disclosing their sexual identity to friends, family, extended family, or coworkers, as vital to claiming their sexual identities (Seidman, 2013). Carastathis, Cohen, Kaczmarek, and Chang (2017) and Mena and Vaccaro (2013) highlight that they often come out to their parents because they want to be authentic about their personal lives and that they expect their parents to accept and affirm them. In the 1990s and earlier, most studies claimed that they typically delayed coming out to their families and first disclosed their sexuality to their friends (D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998). It was also claimed that they would generally be apprehensive about coming out to their parents for fear of potentially disrupting their relationship (Muller, 1987; D'Augelli et al., 1998). Recent studies suggest that young lesbian and gay people more readily disclose their sexual identity to their parents than was previously thought (e.g. Hicky & Grafsky, 2017; Livingston & Fourie, 2016) and that increasingly, they are coming out to their parents, siblings, and friends at approximately the same age (Savin-Williams, 2005; Shilo and Savaya, 2011).

According to Mattison and McWhirter (1995), coming out is an essential step in the process of parent's eventual acceptance of their lesbian and gay children. For parents to accept their lesbian or gay child's sexuality, the child must come out to their parents, rather than the parents figuring it out themselves or the child being "outed" by someone else. Brown and Trevethan (2010) suggest that young lesbian and gay people often come out to their parents in order to be accepted and shielded from the discrimination and stigma they experience outside the home. Parental acceptance consists of a parent or parents' continued affirmation and expressions of warmth and affection toward their lesbian or gay child after the child has informed them of their sexual identity (Freedman, 2008; Bebes, Samarova, Shilo, & Diamond, 2015). This perspective may be summed up as a shift from family conversations that focus on whether being lesbian or gay is "right" or the relative superiority and inferiority of homosexuality and heterosexuality, to ones that focus on acknowledging the diversity of sexuality. Acceptance can include acknowledging the diversity of sexuality as coexisting with diversity in gender, intelligence, career interests, age, and sociopolitical inclinations. So, parental acceptance could mean, for example, a mother describing the personal lives of her heterosexual and lesbian daughters with as much ease as she describes their career interests.

Familial reactions to a young lesbian or gay person's sexual identity have broader implications for society and the family. When these reactions are incriminating, the tensions they cause can result in familial disintegration (Freedman, 2008), failure of same-sex relationships (Meyer, 1989), and homelessness among gay youth (Chrisler, 2017). In contrast, acceptance and affirmation may aid in positive lesbian/ gay identity formation (Elizur & Mintzer, 2001; 2003), involve families as advocates in lesbian and gay social movements, enhance educational outcomes for young lesbian and gay people (Mehus, Watson, Eisenberg, Corliss, & Porta, 2017), and promote lesbian/gay-friendliness in schools (Brandon-Friedman & Kim, 2016; van Bergen & Spiegel, 2014). Families with accepting attitudes may also avert young lesbian and gay people's suicidal ideations or substance abuse (Bebes et al., 2015; Becker & Todd, 2015; Carastathis, 2017; Glick, Krishnan, Fisher, Lieberman, & Sisson, 2016; Lee,

Oliffe, Kelly, & Ferlatte, 2017; McManama et al., 2016; Mitrani et al., 2017; Shilo & Savaya, 2011; Skerrett, Kõlves, & De Leo, 2016; Willoughby, Doty, & Malik, 2008). Accepting families may improve young lesbian and gay people's psychological and sexual health and encourage them to adopt safer sexual practices (Brashers, Neidig, & Goldsmith, 2010; Folch, 2006; Deuba, 2013; LaSala, Fedor, Revere, & Carney, 2016; Lee et al., 2017). Parental acceptance of young lesbian and gay people, thus, has vital consequences not only for these young people themselves, but also for such important institutions as the family, education, and public health.

Fortunately, a range of studies explore how young lesbian and gay people succeed in achieving acceptance from their parents. A few of these studies show that parents demonstrated a sympathetic understanding of their lesbian/ gay child's sexuality after coming out, which led them to eventual acceptance (Gorman-Murray, 2008; Valentine, Skelton, & Butler, 2003; van Bergen and Spiegel, 2014). A lion's share of the research, however, suggests that the process of achieving acceptance was often not immediate and was more complex (Carastathis et al., 2017; Goodrich, 2009; Hicky & Grafski, 2017; Mena & Vaccaro, 2013; Savin-Williams, 2005). For example, most young lesbian and gay people in Savin-Williams' study (2005) were surprised to find that after coming out, their families were less supportive and accepting than their friends, although they had expected the opposite to happen. In Carastathis et al. (2017), young lesbian and gay people who came out to their parents surprisingly found that the parental love they had been receiving was "conditional," that is, their parents loved them with an unspoken expectation that they were heterosexual. Mena and Vaccaro (2013) found that these young people often encountered less than affirmative or supportive attitudes from their parents—though the parents loved their children, they were equally desirous for their children to lead heterosexual lives.

Closer investigation of this complex situation yields a host of questions. What might parental acceptance of young lesbian and gay people look like? Are parental acceptance and parental rejection the only two possible outcomes or might there be degrees of acceptance in a multitude of forms? What processes lead to parental acceptance? Under what conditions do parents come to accept their lesbian and

gay children? Why do some parents eventually accept their lesbian and gay children whereas others do not? Is parental acceptance shaped solely by pre-conceived attitudes toward homosexuality or might there be certain interventions that predispose some parents to more readily accept their lesbian and gay children? Do families with a religious orientation necessarily reject their lesbian and gay children or is this a sweeping generalization? Finally, how might fathers, mothers, and siblings each react differently to a lesbian or gay family member's coming out? This study answers these several questions through an intensive review of extant literature on parental acceptance.

This study examines parental acceptance or rejection through the attitudes and behaviors that young lesbian and gay people generally encounter after coming out to their parents. By doing so, it accounts for two perspectives: one which views outcomes as binary (acceptance or rejection) and one which views acceptance and rejection as occurring in a variety of forms and in degrees. Although the literature of the last two decades claims that parents are now typically more accepting of their lesbian and gay children, acceptance is often not immediate but is achieved through a process. The process of transitioning to acceptance is often complex but can be more successful for families with access to resources and support networks for dealing with the anxieties of knowing that their child identifies as lesbian or gay. These resources and support networks include professional counseling and therapy, supportive friends and extended family, networks of other parents with lesbian and gay children, and lesbian and gay advocacy groups. This article highlights that religiously oriented families are not always unaccepting of their lesbian and gay children and that mothers are not always more accepting of their lesbian and gay children than fathers are. Recommendations for future research are also provided.

The next section (section 2) examines the parents' first reactions to their child coming out to them. Section 3 assesses how the feelings parents have in response to their child's coming out stabilize over time and develop into concrete attitudes. Sections 4 to 6 are the substantive sections of the article that detail the nature and complexities of parental acceptance and examine how parental attitudes toward a lesbian or gay child's sexuality might become more positive over time. Sections 4 and 5 draw on

literature that examines parental responses as either binary—that is, parents either completely reject or completely accept their children’s sexuality—or as varying in form and degree. Section 6 delves into various processes by which parents might become more accepting over time. Finally, the influence of religious orientation on parental acceptance is covered in section 7 and the differences in the responses of mothers, fathers, and siblings are examined in section 8.

## **2 | FIRST REACTIONS**

Before assessing how a parent might accept or reject their lesbian/gay child, it is important to understand the dilemmas that parents face when their child comes out to them. Most parents do not have any language, code, or rules to deal with the stress that results from their first reaction. Elizur and Mintzer (2001; 2003) explained that even those parents who want to be supportive of their lesbian/gay child may not know exactly how to do so because the cultural codes and practices they know are primarily heteronormative. Disclosures can be more traumatic for parents if they are informed about their child’s sexuality or their same-sex relationship by an outsider, especially if done in an unfavorable manner. Einarsdóttir (2016) and Goodrich (2009) noted that, before even reacting to the news, parents may feel hurt for not being kept in the loop on matters related to their own children.

Muller (1987) explained that first parental reactions are usually shaped by the information that the parents have (or do not have) about their child. Some parents may have already wondered about their child’s sexuality prior to their coming out. In one example, Goodrich (2009) explained that the parents had advised their child to behave in more gender-conforming ways, suspecting that he was gay. Livingston and Fourie (2016) explained that hints that parents often identify as “early signs” or “telling incidents” can make them subliminally aware of their child’s sexual identity. Subliminal awareness means subconscious knowledge of the child being lesbian/gay, which is obtained through parents’ own observations of their child and/or receiving information from people with whom the child spends most of their time, including friends and siblings. This awareness may have varying outcomes for parents. Some

might prepare psychologically for a coming-out encounter and the anticipated loss (such as not having grandchildren), and so, may not react with complete shock when their child comes out (Zeininger, Holtman, & Kraus, 2017). Others might not respond calmly to the early signs, such as gender-nonconforming behaviors, and might have attempted to relay the message that the child should try to conform more to their gender. If they come out as lesbian/gay, these parents will not offer much support or affirmation (Kane, 2006).

Regardless of the extent of their knowledge of their child's sexuality, parents might fear reacting inappropriately and of, therefore, hurting their child rather than helping. In Goodrich (2009, p. 46), a mother said, "it was one of those moments; it's like time stands still. You know that if you don't say the right thing, you're going to lose your child." Without subliminal awareness, they could react to their child coming out in a confused manner, which might appear homophobic. In van Bergen and Spiegel (2014, p. 1356), one mother reacted to her gay son coming out by asking, "So you're a faggot?" Her comment expressed more confusion than homophobia because she did not understand what it meant to be gay, and her information was limited to what had been conveyed to her by popular stereotypes. She was open to exploring, and so, readily agreed to go to a gay bar with her son where she discovered that "those people were actually really nice and good fun." According to Chrisler (2017), confused reactions can be avoided if a lesbian/gay person comes out to their parents in the presence of a lesbian/gay-affirmative person known to the family. This person can be an extended family member or a friend who is respected by the parents and the child alike. The parents may draw on the views of this third party while forming their own reactions.

Some parents may not react immediately. Freedman (2008) noted that such delayed reactions might reflect worries over social backlash or the attitudes of extended family—especially grandparents, career setbacks, health concerns, and the safety of their child.<sup>2</sup> Many people make a misinformed association between homosexuality and HIV/AIDS. Therefore, as Zeininger et al. (2017) observed, whether homophobic or not, parents may worry about their gay son contracting HIV/AIDS through his

same-sex sexual practices. Jadwin-Cakmak, Pingel, Harper, and Bauermeister (2015) found that one of the several more intolerant or uninformed reactions was for parents to “use the threat of HIV as ammunition against” a gay son and to warn him that he would contract AIDS if he was gay (p. 283). The authors also explain that a more inclusive and informed parent may converse with their son on health issues after becoming aware of his sexuality. Subsequently, the parent can respectfully focus on discussing safer sexual behavior and STI prevention techniques.

Goodrich (2009) noted that, after a lesbian/gay child comes out of the closet, their family may go into one and struggle with the coming-out process, in a manner similar to their child’s own process of coming out. Parents often need time to process a coming-out encounter, some hoping that the child might be going through a phase. Some parents might feel isolated and might not know who to turn to for support. They might not know other parents who have dealt with a similar situation, as Mattison and McWhirter (1995) indicated. Others might talk to trusted friends and family members in confidence and hide the matter from others. While doing so, parents may be doubtful and wonder about how their child might react to discussing this matter with someone other than a member of the family. The parents also make decisions on whether to disclose this information to close relatives, especially those who are influential in and central to their family but may be more conservative (e.g., grandparents). Making such decisions in confusing situations can be very stressful for parents. Goodrich (2009) explained that the prospects of accidental disclosure through their child being spotted with their same-sex partner adds to their worries. Trussel, King, and Oswald (2015) explained that some parents may take it “socially harder” and keep their child’s sexuality hidden from friends and extended family members, a stressful situation for parents and child both.

Zeininger et al. (2017) indicated that parents with intuitively affirmative attitudes toward homosexuality are likely to react affirmatively to their child’s coming out. Strangely, this is not always true. Some parents use a different yardstick for their own children in matters of sexuality. Goodrich (2009) noted that some parents might accept lesbian and gay people but would not want their own child to

be lesbian/gay. While believing themselves to be liberal and progressive, they may feel astonished to discover their inability to accept the homosexuality of their own child. A respondent in Freedman (2008, p. 240), a mother who perceived herself as lesbian/gay-inclusive, felt “choked up and was shocked at her own reaction more than the news of her son’s disclosure.” In contrast, some parents that are perceived as prejudiced and conservative may react positively to their child’s coming out. These reactions, Gorman-Murray (2008) explained, may result from knowing a close friend or relative who is lesbian/gay. Positive reactions may occur because of parents’ subliminal awareness of their child’s sexuality. In some cases, parents deliberately make homonegative comments to create a delay in their child’s coming out and prepare themselves psychologically for a coming out encounter (Jadwin-Cakmak, 2015).

First reactions, therefore, can be confirmatory (because of prior knowledge), confusing, or even stressful. There are varieties and degrees of reactions, and often, these reactions tend toward guilt, hurt, or disappointment. Parents tend to anticipate the reactions of their friends and family to this new information, which they often anticipate to be negative or incriminating. First reactions mark the beginning of a transitional phase for parents, during which they process the information about their child’s sexuality and develop certain stable and concrete attitudes about it. How these attitudes stabilize often depends on how the family copes with stressful situations generally and the nature of the parent-child relationship, both of which are discussed in the next section.

### **3 | ATTITUDES STABILIZING AFTER COMING OUT**

The scholars Elizur and Mintzer (2001), Katz-Wise, Rosario, and Tsappis (2016), Rosario (2015), and Zeininger et al. (2017) observe that how parents’ attitudes toward their lesbian/gay child stabilizes depends on the nature of familial relationships and how the family handles stressful situations involving children. Bowlby’s (1969) attachment theory details how coping with child-related stresses in the family depends on the nature of attachment between the child and their parent(s). Drawing on this theory, Rosario (2016) observed that the parents develop concrete attitudes toward their lesbian/gay child usually depending on the level of “secured attachment” in the parent-child relationship. Secured attachment refers

to the child's level and frequency of access to the parent when the child is in need. It also signifies that the child receives assurance from the parents that challenging issues can be managed in a positive and emotionally regulated environment. A securely attached parent might initially be surprised, disappointed, or even angry when their child comes out to them. They do, however, try to overcome these emotions by continuously being available to their child and being responsive to them. This process may start even before explicit disclosure, if the parents have subliminal awareness of their child's sexuality. When that happens, parents are already working to mitigate their child's feelings of guilt and ensure the child's welfare and safety. Although a secured attachment may not always lead to acceptance, it may offer some degree of parental support.<sup>3</sup> For example, securely attached parents might become protective of their lesbian/gay child in light of the possible discrimination, victimization, and bullying the child may experience. While being supportive, however, as Katz-Wise et al. (2016) and Zeininger et al. (2017) pointed out, they may not always affirm their child's sexuality.

In an unsecured parental relationship, a parent and their child may decide to avoid this matter altogether and become unresponsive to each other. Rosario (2016) pointed out that the lack of communication in such relationships could make parental attitudes toward a gay child even more negative and unsupportive. An unsecured parent-child relationship and parents' negative views on homosexuality can be a potent combination for the parents to develop long-term adversarial attitudes toward their lesbian/gay child. Becker and Todd (2015) and Zeininger et al. (2017) noted that due to the lack of communication in the family, parents' beliefs that homosexuality is unnatural and a matter of choice may strengthen, and they may feel frustrated with their child for having made that choice. Hicky and Grafsky (2017) and Jadwin-Cakmak et al. (2015) suggested that these views may also encompass such stereotypical beliefs about young lesbian and gay people as: (a) being lesbian/gay can be a precursor to becoming transgender, (b) homosexuality is a possible outcome of either a lack of positive female/male role models in the family or trauma caused by rape or molestation, and (c) same-sex attraction can be "healed" through medical interventions or reparative therapies. These beliefs, however, may be

moderated by such factors as a parent's age, generational affiliation, ethnicity, or level of education (Chrisler, 2017). For example, newer parents, who have raised their children while lesbian and gay social movements were gaining visibility, are likely to be more supportive of their lesbian and gay children than their counterparts from previous generations, who became parents during the advent of the AIDS crisis, when most lesbians and gay men kept their sexuality a secret (Serovich, Skeen, Walters, & Robinson, 1993; Gorman-Murray, 2008).

Parents' attitudes toward their gay sons may also be shaped by belief in hegemonic masculinity. Kane (2006) pointed out that parents, especially fathers, might feel that their gay sons' sexuality resulted from their failure to teach their son how to behave in a masculine and gender-typical manner. Underlying these feelings are the notions that masculinity is not a characteristic that naturally unfolds but is something that parents are responsible for crafting and shaping in their sons. Some parents perceive masculinity as being defined by heterosexuality and therefore believe that their son will not be masculine if he is gay (Livingston and Fourie, 2016). Some fathers consciously make anti-gay comments or ridicule their gay sons hoping that these rebukes will make their sons heterosexual and, therefore, masculine. A father also might indulge in blaming himself for not being an ideal role model in their son's masculine development. Jadwin-Cakmak (2015) explained that such attitudes incriminate both the gay sons and their fathers.

Parental acceptance can take a different shape when a lesbian/gay child has a partner as opposed to when they do not. As long as the child is single or their sexual life is concealed, parents may be comforted by imagining their child as asexual and thereby avoid any confrontation with their not being heterosexual. Freedman (2008) and Mattison and McWhirter (1995) observed that, when the child has a partner whom they want to introduce to their family, parents will no longer be able to imagine their child as asexual. According to Serovich et al. (1993), parents experience two major obstacles in integrating their child's partner into their family. One is the lack of appropriate terms to define a same-sex partner. A "partner" connotes such formal meanings as "business partner," without suggesting intimacy. The term

“lover” may sound too casual or even illicit for a committed relationship. If the couple is married, references to “his” husband or “her” wife may be even more discomfiting to parents. The second obstacle concerns parental discomfort with the public display of affection between the child and a same-sex partner. Parents may feel more uncomfortable with the public display of intimacy between their child and a same-sex partner than with an opposite-sex partner. This is because the intimacy with a partner of the same-sex signifies, in addition to their child’s transitioning to an adult, a departure from the normative sexual behaviors with which parents are familiar and had envisioned for their child (Serovich et al., 1993). If these obstacles can be overcome, as Griffin, Wirth, and Wirth (1986) and Silverstein (1977) noted, the stability of the child’s intimate relationship could strengthen their bond with their parents. The acceptance of a partnered lesbian/gay child may also include numerous financial and social benefits that parents generally extend to their child after marriage (Serovich et al., 1993). This acceptance may also stem from the parental perceptions of the child’s transitioning to maturity and a stable social life, as identified by Diamond and Shpigel (2014) and Einarsdóttir (2016).

The stabilizing of parental attitudes toward a lesbian/gay child, thus, depends on the nature of the attachment between the parent(s) and the child. The parent(s) and the child are more likely to reach a middle ground of mutual understanding if their relationship is secure and they are accessible to one another. Nevertheless, these attitudes, are also shaped by the child’s gender conformity, the parent’s(s’) beliefs about homosexuality, and homosexuality’s perceived associations with gender identity. The child being in a relationship can also shape these attitudes, depending on whether parent(s) perceive this relationship as a form of deviance or an extension to their family. Once parental attitudes have stabilized, the accepting or disapproving nature of parent’s(s’) behavior can be more readily identified. Most studies, including Carastathis et al. 2017; Diamond et al., 2012; Gibson & Macleod, 2012; Mena & Vaccaro, 2013; Peel 2001, suggest that, when parental attitudes stabilize somewhat, parental reactions may be expressed as degrees or forms of acceptance or rejection. Other studies (e.g., Serovich et al., 1993 and Valentine et al., 2003) find that outcomes are binary, that is, either complete acceptance or rejection. A

review of the latter group of studies is appropriate before examining parental acceptance as a fuzzy outcome requiring extensive discussion.

#### **4 | BINARY OUTCOMES: ACCEPTANCE OR REJECTION**

A few studies, Valentine et al. (2003) and van Bergen and Spiegel (2014) among them, suggest that some parents accept their lesbian/gay child immediately upon their coming out. Explanations offered for how challenging situations in familial relationships are amicably dealt with apply to coming-out episodes as well. According to Valentine et al. (2003), “personalizing families” put less emphasis on hierarchy. In personalizing families, power is more evenly distributed, leading to open discussion and a greater awareness among family members of one another’s circumstances. In such an atmosphere, parents are open to hearing and learning from their child. Valentine et al. (2003) observed that young lesbian and gay people in personalizing families often research homosexuality in order to answer questions that they anticipate their parents might have. The environment offered by personalizing families may be more congenial to young lesbian and gay people for the expression of their knowledge, thoughts, feelings, and experiences regarding this complex issue. They might also strategically plan a coming-out encounter for a family holiday or vacation, during which a relaxed environment and positive mood might be more conducive to acceptance.

Another scenario entailing immediate and complete acceptance involves bisexual parents. Serovich et al. (1993) had long hypothesized that non-heterosexuality in parents may predispose them to accept their lesbian/gay child more readily compared to how their heterosexual counterparts would do. A gay respondent in van Bergen and Spiegel (2014) was skeptical about coming out to his parents, who he did not know were bisexual. When he came out, his parents embraced him, and they had a mutual coming-out encounter. In a few cases from the same study, parents already had a subliminal awareness of their child’s sexuality, were affirmative about it, and were prepared to embrace and accept their child whenever they were willing to come out.

A few studies, including van Bergen and Spiegel (2014) and Brandon-Friedman and Kim (2016), suggested that, when the sibling or cousin of one of the parents is lesbian/gay, the process of coming-out was already familiar to the family. This familiarity increased the likelihood that the parents would respond affirmatively to their own lesbian/gay child. Jadwin-Cakmak (2015) suggested that parents might fully accept their lesbian/gay child due to the increased sympathy for and visibility of lesbian and gay issues in the media in the past few decades. A general increase in the number of people supporting lesbian and gay people (Loftus, 2001) might also have made parents more supportive of lesbian and gay identities and unsurprised at their own child's coming out. Lynch and Hanson (1992) suggested that a fondness for difference, such as might be found in families where the parents come from different ethnic or cultural backgrounds, may predispose parents to more readily accepting their child's sexual identity. For example, Livingston and Fourie (2016) observed that some fathers idealized their sons' "gayness" as a sign of their being intelligent, creative, artistically talented, physically attractive, and/or "special."

Similarly, a few studies examined parents' absolute rejection of their lesbian and gay children. According to Valentine et al. (2003), complete rejection is most likely to happen in "positional families." Positional families valorize hierarchy in parent-child relationships. In such families, parents generally maintain the upper hand, deciding the rules of the family and establishing their authority over their children. Conversations on sexuality are least likely to occur in positional families and any coming-out encounter is most likely perceived as a challenge to parental authority and heteronormative family rules, as noted by Gorman-Murray (2008). In positional families, when parents perceive or learn that their child is lesbian/gay, they are likely to claim that tolerant reactions might signal approval. Diamond et al. (2012) explained that they might, therefore, show their deliberate and overt rejection using force or coercion, hoping such tactics might make their child heterosexual. Savin-Williams and Ream (2003) suggested that these coercive behaviors can include the forceful expulsion of a lesbian/gay child from their home.

Another reason why parents might use force is to set an example for other children in the family. According to Dawood, Pillard, Horvath, Revelle, and Bailey (2000), parents might respond with abusive

behavior to a coming-out episode in order to dissuade other male children in the family from identifying or coming out as gay. Such behavior might be driven by the assumption that homosexuality has a genetic component, which would mean that any male siblings of the gay child might also be gay. The message to the siblings is that the consequences of self-identifying as gay are harsh. Another fear that these parents might grapple with is the notion that male homosexuality can be transmitted by incest. “Quarantining” their gay son would then be an appropriate measure to prevent the transmission of same-sex sexual behavior within the family (Dawood et al., 2000).

Complete rejection is more likely when a child comes out during adolescence. Adolescent lesbian and gay people face the dual disadvantage of being financially and emotionally dependent on their parents (Dane and MacDonald, 2009) and being less able than adults to articulate their sexuality (Feinstein, Wadsworth, Davila, and Goldfried, 2014). Therefore, as Dane and MacDonald (2009) explained, parents may resort to tactics of complete rejection to bring their child back to heterosexuality. One such tactic, “hostile recognition” (Muller, 1987), involves parents employing corrective measures such as sending their child to live elsewhere under institutional arrangements (like boarding schools) or with a conservative extended family that will prevent them from further developing a lesbian or gay identity . Some parents may employ these tactics of estrangement for several years until their child reaches adulthood. In contrast, when a lesbian/gay person comes out in early adulthood, after attaining some financial and emotional independence, parents tend to respond in a more balanced way. Even if parents do not completely accept their child, neither will they completely dismiss them (Livingston and Fourie, 2016). Extensive research is available on such reactions. The next section delves into this literature and explains how acceptance and rejection can manifest in varying degrees and forms.

## **5 | THE DEGREES AND VARIOUS FORMS OF ACCEPTANCE AND REJECTION**

More research supports the conclusion that parents accept or reject their lesbian and gay children in certain forms or by certain degrees. The forms of acceptance and rejection have been expressed qualitatively (e.g., Einarsdóttir, 2016, Jadwin-Cakmak et al., 2015, and Peel 2001;), whereas the degrees

of acceptance have been measured quantitatively (e.g., Savin-Williams, 1990 and 2005) or expressed qualitatively (Jadwin-Cakmak et al., 2015). Forms of acceptance or rejection capture a range of parental attitudes toward lesbian and gay children. The degrees of acceptance capture the qualitative gradations or quantitative variations that measure a lesbian/gay person's perceptions of the degree of their parents' acceptance or rejection.

According to Gibson and Macleod (2012), Muller (1987), and Peel (2001), in the long run, parental acceptance depends on the comfort or discomfort that parents feel with the sexuality of their lesbian and gay children. In some cases, the family can arrange a set of civil and respectful relationships by drawing clear boundaries. These boundaries ensure that the parents will not overstep their lesbian/gay child's privacy and that the child will not overstep the zone of their parents' explicit discomfort with homosexuality. Muller (1987) suggested that the process of forming these boundaries and adhering to them results in a range of parental attitudes. Some parents may develop a "resentful denial," maintaining a civil relationship with their children without acknowledging their sexual identity and maintaining limited contact with them. In other cases, parents can remain in "loving denial" of their children's sexuality, that is, maintaining a loving relationship with their child while remaining sequestered in their sexuality but tolerating and recognizing it to a limited extent. Some parents show a "resigned acceptance" by accepting their lesbian/gay child, realizing that they will "have to" live together as a family and that there is little they can do to change the situation.

Along the lines of the categories suggested by Muller (1987), Peel (2001) observed the attitude of "liberal acceptance," which involved some parents saying that they would love their children regardless of their sexual identity, while couching this claim in hetero-norms and suggesting the deviance of homosexuality in terms so subtle that a lesbian/gay child perceives the acceptance as absolute. The children often adjust their expectations for acceptance to match the behavior their parents exhibit, often reporting that their circumstances are superior to those in other families that are more hostile. Although the parental attitudes observed by Muller (1987) and Peel (2001) suggested a reduction of hostility in

familial relations, such gains are usually modest in nature. Even in a respectful and civil environment, Gibson and Macleod (2012) found that parents might subtly exclude their lesbian/child, resulting in the child feeling like an outsider at family gatherings and events.

Acceptance might also be shown through silent gestures. Sometimes, parents hesitate or feel awkward about approving of their children's sexuality. Their comments seem homophobic at times, but they show love for their child and/or their partner through gestures. Einarsdóttir's (2016) study of lesbian women in Iceland, for example, reported that, although a married lesbian couple may not command the same respect from their family that a heterosexual couple does, it might receive kind, silent gestures from parents. In one case, a mother made identical nightgowns for her lesbian daughter and her partner. In another case, a mother began searching for a potential sperm donor for her daughter and her wife to have a child. Silent gestures may be a way of approving of a child's sexuality without explicit verbal approval, which might be awkward for many parents.

Like acceptance, rejection can also take several forms, which can be broadly characterized as blatant, hostile, or subtle. Blatant rejection may be expressed in a respectful way, such as in, "I love you and will always will, but it is hard for me when you bring a woman home with you" or similar sentiments. Blatant rejection can also be conveyed either in a disrespectful manner ("You are a disgrace," or "Sucks for you.") or expressing the desire to remain detached from the child's private life ("We don't want to know," or "We accept you, but...") (Diamond et al., 2012, p. 65; Mena & Vaccaro, 2013, p. 11). Blatant rejection might also be confrontational (direct, overt, and aggressive) and explicit. Withdrawal is another blatant form of rejection, in which parents ignore their lesbian and gay children or give them the silent treatment (Carastathis et al., 2017).

Blatant rejection and hostile recognition differ in mildness and degree of civility. Parents who blatantly reject their lesbian and gay children can still develop a civil relationship with them. Muller (1987) explained that in hostile recognition, however, both sides take an uncompromising position, and it

can be difficult to find common ground. Carastathis et al. (2017) noted that familial hostilities can include verbal or physical abuse, disownment, estrangement, and condemnation. Belmonte and Holmes (2016) suggested that, although parents and children might be able to find a common ground even when the parents blatantly reject their child's sexuality, it might prove impossible for them to "be themselves" when spending time together.

The subtler forms of rejection are more indirect, covert, and passive in nature. Subtle rejection can be a continuous expression of grief, sorrow, or pity. Freedman (2008) explained how a lesbian/gay person might feel subtly rejected if a parent falls ill or is hospitalized because of the grief and trauma of never having grandchildren or being pitied by others for having a lesbian/gay child. According to Mena and Vaccaro (2013), subtle rejection might express the parents' conditional love for their lesbian and gay children. Although parents may sound affectionate and loving, they impose the condition that the child must perform heterosexuality in order for their love and affection to continue. This forces the child to choose either their sexuality or their parents, without explicitly asking them to do so. Although this form of rejection is not overt or direct, a lesbian/gay child still feels rejected and unsupported.

Other studies measure the degree of acceptance on a continuum from total acceptance to total rejection. According to Diamond and Shpigel (2014), the underlying rationale for this scale is what parents attribute their child's homosexuality to. Parents who believe that sexuality is innate are more likely to be found on the acceptance end of the continuum. The belief that homosexuality is a deliberate choice places parents toward the rejection end of the continuum. Savin-Williams' survey findings (1990) were the first to suggest that most parents, approximately 70 to 75 percent, showed varying degrees of acceptance.<sup>4</sup> Successive studies, such as Glick et al., (2016), Mena and Vaccaro (2013), and Weingarden et al. (2011) align more with this view than with the idea that reactions are binary. Qualitative gradations can demonstrate degrees of acceptance. Based on their interviews, Jadwin-Cakmak et al. (2015) identified six themes regarding parental acceptance and rejection: immediate rejection, denial, individual acceptance but group rejection, support without full acceptance, ambivalent acceptance, and full acceptance.

Arranged in this manner, the themes portray a gradient of lesser to greater acceptance, creating an “acceptance continuum.”

Examination of the forms and degrees of acceptance/rejection suggest that, when homonegativity and parental love combine, parental attitudes can be more complex than simple acceptance or rejection. Such forms of acceptance as ambivalent acceptance, loving denial, resigned acceptance, and liberal acceptance may be shaped by sociocultural norms and preexisting parental beliefs on homosexuality. Likewise, the various forms of rejection—denial, individual acceptance but group rejection, subtle rejection, blatant rejection, and hostile recognition—indicate that, even among parents who disapprove of homosexuality, they desire or endeavor to maintain a civil and amicable relationship with their gay children. Some rejecting parents, though, may sever their relationship with their lesbian and gay children.

As discussed in the introduction, parental acceptance is vital for young lesbian and gay people, their families, and important institutions like education and public health. It is, therefore, important to examine the possibilities of parents becoming more accepting of their lesbian and gay children over time. The next section delves into how parents might transition to acceptance, under what conditions this is possible, and why some parents eventually accept their children’s sexual identity and others do not.

## **6 | INCREASINGLY ACCEPTING ATTITUDES OVER TIME**

Arriving at parental acceptance is often a complex process, and there can be several pathways to get there. The most recognizable theme in the cluster of studies on achieving parental acceptance is offered by Diamond and Shpigel (2014) who suggest that parents often become more supportive of their lesbian and gay children over time with the help of external resources, even if complete acceptance is sometimes never reached. The fear, anger, and rejection that families experience initially are less likely to intensify when such external resources are sought. In recent decades, the number of available resources for parents to cope with the stresses of knowing the sexuality of their lesbian/gay child has increased

tremendously. These resources include family-based therapy and wellness counselling (Diamond et al., 2012; Diamond & Shpigel, 2014), support from lesbian/gay-affirmative extended family members and friends (Trussell et al., 2015; van Bergen and Spiegel, 2014), networks of parents with lesbian and gay children (Freedman, 2008; Gorman-Murray, 2008), and programs offered by lesbian and gay advocacy groups for parents (Mattison & McWhirter, 1995). In addition, an increase in the positive visibility of lesbians and gay men has made families more comfortable with homosexuality, if not completely accepting. Extant studies describe several of the paths that parents have taken to acceptance of their children.

In some studies, young lesbian/gay respondents believed that being accepted by their parents was a matter of time. The respondents in Serovich et al. (1993) believed that the increased visibility of lesbian and gay people and an increasingly positive tone in the media regarding lesbian and gay rights had set the stage for parental acceptance. Around eight percent of lesbian and gay adolescents in Samarova, Shilo, and Diamond (2014) believed that the parental acceptance they received was an outcome of changing societal and familial attitudes toward homosexuality. Trussell et al. (2015) showed that some lesbian and gay people believed that their parents became more accepting of them after watching television sitcoms and movies like *The Family Stone*. They felt that their parents' media consumption exposed them to positive portrayals of lesbian and gay characters and, therefore, they decided to reconsider their relationship with their own children.

Another set of studies suggests that strategizing and self-advocacy may bring further change. Anthony Ocampo (2014) suggested the strategy of "moral management," which was used by Filipino and Latino second-generation gay men to "strategize" their sexual identity within their families. Ocampo found that these men remained closeted for a long time and prevented any accidental disclosures by managing their gender conformity, keeping their sexuality invisible, and developing friendship networks with heterosexual men. They chose a time to come out when they anticipated the least negative reactions from their parents. After coming out, their tactics shifted toward simplifying the complexity of gay life for

their parents, highlighting gay role models within their ethnic communities, and countering the negative stereotypes about gay people. Ocampo (2015) found that by strategizing their gay identity through moral management, many of his respondents had won some degree of acceptance from their families. Similarly, in Samarova et al. (2014, p. 685), around one-third of the lesbian/gay adolescent respondents believed that they were “agents of change.” They thought it was important to bring to their parents’ attention the positive aspects of lesbian and gay life through repeated disclosures. By referencing their same-sex dates as normally as they would have with opposite-sex dates, these adolescents often used homonormative tactics, meaning that heterosexual ideals can be adopted by young lesbian and gay people as well.

Nordic studies such as Einarsdóttir (2016) and Hanke, Egmond, Crespo, and Boer (2016) suggested that family rituals could be a pathway to the acceptance of same-sex relationships and same-sex marriages. The authors contend that although Nordic countries like Iceland and the Netherlands have liberal social attitudes and same-sex marriages are legal there, marriage by itself is not a passport to parental acceptance. Participating in celebrations, annual holidays, family dinners, and other rituals such as the transfer of legacies or artifacts from one generation to the next are important avenues of developing family relatedness and eventually receiving affirmation regarding same-sex relationships and marriages.

Although media consumption, strategizing, self-advocacy, and family rituals have worked in some families, these avenues should not be construed as the key processes that lead to parental acceptance. For example, as pointed out by Hickey and Gafsky (2017), when parents are intensely heterosexist and homonegative, family rituals are more likely to become venues where lesbian and gay people feel misunderstood and or isolated rather than integrated. A more widely accepted view is that parental acceptance is generally an outcome of “family functioning,” which constitutes several cognitive and behavioral processes that a family develops as a team. When these processes stand the test of time, they result in better understanding between parent(s) and their lesbian/gay child and a stronger family bond (Goodrich, 2009; Mattison & McWhirter, 1995). Goodrich’s identity development model (2009), for example, described that the initial grief, shock, and secrecy involved with knowing that the child is

lesbian/gay, may elicit to a multitude of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses. As parents become aware of their child's struggles and the discrimination and prejudices that they face for being non-heterosexual, parents develop empathy. By becoming acquainted with lesbian and gay issues, parents experience a cognitive shift toward homosexuality and question their own beliefs and stereotypes. Following these cognitive shifts, this behavioral shift may begin when parents attend lesbian and gay events and later become advocates for lesbian and gay rights. These cognitive and behavioral shifts may result in the acceptance of their own lesbian/gay child.

A range of studies describe the familial processes that eventually lead to acceptance. Drawing on Kübler-Ross's grief model (1969), Chrisler (2017) suggests that some parents experience their own coming-out process by going through successive stages of grief, namely shock, denial, anger, guilt, and eventual acceptance. Livingston and Fourie (2016) explained the operationalization of this model, suggesting that when parents are caught off guard in a coming-out encounter, they react with shock and denial and may make hurtful comments. Rarely, though, do they physically abuse their child, cut financial support, or kick them out of their home. After, expending all their negative energy, they feel ashamed and guilty and accuse themselves of failing as parents. As a result, they become somewhat more lenient toward their child and resort to pressure tactics to bring their child "back" to heterosexuality. Mothers often experience stronger feelings of guilt and shame because of their typically greater emotional investment in the child's development. Fathers often remain in a state of denial and persist in rejection. The parents' emotions are combined with their child's and those of the rest of the family, and so, conflicts and issues with adjustment arise, disrupting the entirety of family life. With time, this turbulence settles down and feelings of concern for the other's wellbeing return. As the child agrees to comply with some of the parents' requests, their parents might offer some recognition—though not total support or acceptance—of their child's sexuality.

Still, not all families take the route of grief leading to acceptance. Some parents have become more accepting and developed a trusting relationship with their child after disclosure without undergoing

much grief. Although their reactions may be initially negative, they appreciate having the information needed to manage what they perceive as a crisis. A supportive family member, coworker, or friend might help them feel more at ease (Chrisler, 2017). Parents may promise guidance and support to their lesbian and gay children while remaining open to intergenerational learning. They show inquisitiveness about what it is like to be lesbian or gay. Mattison and McWhirter (1995) explained that when parents and their children learn from one another, they are in a better position to meet each other's expectations, resolve conflicts, share values, and define boundaries. Their closeness increases also because both parent(s) and child realize that they share a stigmatized identity—the child being lesbian/gay and the parents being parents of a lesbian/gay child. Thus, as Becker and Todd (2015) indicated, they feel the need to respond to this stigma by strengthening their bond.

Some parents agree to undergo counseling and therapy specially designed for families with lesbian and gay children. Diamond et al. (2012) and Diamond and Shpigel (2014) observed that, generally, young lesbian and gay people might show more interest and do more research on therapeutic interventions than their parents do. Harboring a strong desire for parental acceptance, a lesbian/gay person may persuade their parents to participate in family counseling. Family-based therapy can mitigate the initial shock, denial, anger, frustration, and confusion that parents experience after becoming aware of their child's sexuality. Such therapies have helped families to have open conversations and to understand one another's perspective with an open mind. During therapy, young lesbian and gay people realize that parental acceptance cannot be achieved immediately and that parents often need time to process the turmoil they experience after disclosure. In a counseling session, parents get the opportunity to speak openly about their struggles in accepting their child's sexuality. They express their concern about their family's reputation, religious beliefs, fear of HIV/AIDS, discrimination in employment, and the general wellbeing of their child. During therapy, when parents realize that being lesbian or gay is not a lifestyle choice or the effect of popular media influence, they become more accepting of their child. They also

acknowledge their love and commitment for their child and pledge to support them and shield them from social discrimination.

A therapist also helps parents identify people within their family and social circles who are lesbian and gay-inclusive and advise parents to establish more frequent contact with them. Van Bergen and Spiegel (2014) and Trussell et al. (2015) suggested that identifying and maintaining contact with extended family members or close friends who are lesbian/gay moderates homonegative parental attitudes. Weingarden et al. (2011) indicated that, during counseling sessions, these individuals can help therapists mitigate parental homophobia, especially when it is due to deeply held religious convictions. Therapists may also direct parents to lesbian and gay-affirmative organizations such as PFLAG, Dignity USA, or Lesbian and Gay Resource Centers, which work with the families of young lesbian and gay people. Their resources, such as newsletters, recommended readings, and counseling groups, help parents resolve their conflicts and confusion (Mattison & McWhirter, 1995). Having a support group of families and being acquainted with the stories of other families that have been through a similar situation help parents in their transition to acceptance (Freedman, 2008; Gorman-Murray, 2008). With the help of these resources, a family can work as a team to plan future coming-out encounters with extended family members (Diamond & Shpigel, 2014), especially grandparents who may be more conservative and influential in the family unit (Goodrich, 2009).

When parents have access to knowledge and resources on homosexuality, they can experience personal growth and develop coping strategies to overcome the rejection of their child. Together, parent(s) and child may read literature or watch videos about homosexuality, attend lesbian and gay events and conferences, and meet other families with lesbian/gay children, all as a result of the change within the parents (Hickey & Grafsky, 2017). Some parents may begin writing their experiences in a diary or write a blog or publish an article. They realize that the expectations of heterosexuality they had for their lesbian/gay child, which they thought were “normal,” were, in fact, impractical. Parents who thought that heterosexuality was a “base orientation” no longer try to persuade their lesbian and gay children to

reorient their sexuality, stay away from non-heterosexual people, or marry a person of the opposite sex (Freedman, 2008). Even if they cannot completely forego these expectations, they will no longer reject their child and will develop a more positive attitude (Samarova et al., 2014).

Parents have developed ways to overcome their cognitive dissonance regarding homosexuality after undergoing counseling and therapy. Following therapeutic interventions, parents may reassess their beliefs and assumptions. Religious parents, for example, may attempt to reconcile their religious beliefs with their child's sexuality. They might pray, read religious texts that reinterpret the doctrines of their faith, read a greater diversity of literature to acquaint themselves with more liberal religious perspectives (Livingston & Fourie, 2016), meet with clergies to develop a better understanding of religion and sexuality (Freedman, 2008), and lead discussions on religion and sexuality in their faith communities (Zeininger et al., 2017). Through their own education, they may begin to educate others. Through the process of coming out as a family, parents often become advocates of lesbian and gay people within their extended families and churches, especially when they encounter religious conservatism in their churches (Hicky & Grafsky, 2017). Acting as "radical normals," these parents have affirmed their support not only for their own lesbian and gay children but have also sought similar commitments from other parents in their church (Johnson & Best, 2012).

Transitioning to acceptance, thus, can be realized in several ways. Although some respondents believed that acceptance was a matter of time or was achieved through advocacy and strategizing, most research on this topic suggests that parental acceptance is often achieved through systematic interventions like therapy and counselling or through support networks. Support networks, comprised of sympathetic family members, friends, and other parents of gay children, may help parents navigate the anxieties and stresses of knowing that their child identifies as lesbian/gay. The resources available through organizations like the PFLAG can help parents of lesbian and gay children develop relationships with parents who have undergone similar circumstances. By learning from their experiences, they may make it easier to come out as the parents of a lesbian/gay child to family and friends, while their affirmation and

support for their child increases. A support network of close friends and family members may also assist the achievement of therapeutic intervention's desired outcome.

The last two sections delve into two other important topics regarding parental acceptance. Section 7 explores whether religiously oriented families are likely to reject their lesbian and gay children or whether this view is too sweeping as far as the current understanding of religiously oriented parents goes. Section 8 explores the attitudes of siblings toward young lesbian and gay people and how fathers and mothers might react differently to their lesbian and gay children.

## **7 | RELIGIOUS FAMILIES AND ACCEPTANCE**

Numerous studies have focused on the effects of familial religious values on parental acceptance, either as the main predictor or as a controlling factor. Parents with orthodox, fundamentalist, or conservative religious orientations have generally been seen as unsupportive of their lesbian and gay children (Anonymous, 2016; van Bergen & Spiegel, 2014; Weingarden et al., 2011). Whether real or imagined, their children have often attributed this lack of support to the incongruence between their parents' religious orientations and homosexuality (Jadwin-Cakmak et al., 2015). This conclusion, however, cannot be generalized across all religious families. Irrespective of individual families' etiological beliefs about homosexuality as biological or socio-environmental, affirmative religious communities have helped parents support their lesbian and gay children even if that support did not translate to acceptance (Freedman, 2008). More recent studies such as Becker and Todd (2015), Chrisler (2017), and Lassiter (2015) suggest that religious commitment and regular attendance at church can lead to more tolerant attitudes toward same-sex orientations. Such outcomes depend on the level of lesbian and gay-affirmation in the affiliated church and the denomination.

The most current view of the connection between religiosity and parental acceptance is that this correlation can go either way. For example, Zeininger et al. (2017) found that, of the ten religiously oriented families in their study that accepted lesbian and gay family members, five were affiliated with

religious organizations that promoted the acceptance of homosexuality and the other five were affiliated with more conservative organizations. The first group kept their religious options open and joined a church only when they were sure of the church's affirmative stance on homosexuality. The second group, including Catholics, Presbyterians, and Methodists, left their churches and altered many of the basic tenets of their faith, maintaining their religious commitments and a more lesbian/gay-affirmative attitude simultaneously. Zeininger et al.'s findings align with Serovich et al. (1993), which found that religiosity may bear no significant relationship to parental acceptance or attitudes toward homosexuality. Neilson (2017) suggested that identification with the conservative Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) may not necessarily lead to the rejection of a lesbian/gay child in the family. Some LDS parents have developed a loving and strong relationship with their lesbian and gay adolescent children and have offered family and religion as sources of protection for them.

An assessment of extant literature and the increase in the number of Christian denominations that have taken officially lesbian/gay-affirmative stances (including the Presbyterian Church, the United Methodist Church, the General Board of Church and Society, the Episcopal Church, the United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries, and the Union of Reform Judaism (Ghosh, in press) suggests that, although some individuals with religious commitments may have negative views of homosexuality, this view is no longer definitive. Qualitative variations between religious faiths and the means of adhering to them suggest a wider range of possibilities.

## **8 | MOM, DAD, AND SIBLINGS**

Another topic of interest is the different ways that mothers and fathers react to their child coming out. Earlier studies on this topic, such as Boon and Miller (1999), Savin-Williams and Ream (2003), Toomey and Richardson (2009), and Valentine et al. (2003) contended that young lesbian and gay people often feel more comfortable coming out to their mother first and that mothers are more likely to accept them wholeheartedly. This is because children often perceive their mothers as more involved, supportive,

and sensitive to their lives and struggles than their fathers, who they usually describe as unresponsive, homonegative, and less sensitive (Matthews, 2002). A range of studies, including Morrow (2004), Padilla, Crisp, and Rew (2010), and Savin-Williams (1998), suggested that mothers and sisters more readily accept a lesbian/gay person into their family than fathers and brothers do.

A more recent study (Jadwin-Cakmak et al., 2015) highlighted an alternative perspective that suggests that the silence and unresponsiveness of fathers can be an internalizing process, through which they reflect on the situation, reacting only when they feel certain about the matter. In contrast, mothers may react impulsively and, in many situations, fathers have helped them to change their homophobic attitudes toward their children. Also, studies that highlight affirmative mothers have focused largely on gay sons (Livingston and Fourie 2016). Einarsdóttir (2016) and Almack (2007) offered insights on mothers' rejection of their lesbian daughters, indicating that some lesbians receive sharp and persistently ostracizing behavior from their mothers. As some fathers who believe in hegemonic masculinity feel the responsibility to be a positive role model for their sons (Jadwin-Cakmak et al., 2015), mothers may also feel a similar responsibility toward their daughters. In Einarsdóttir's study (2016), a few mothers believed that they had failed as mothers when their daughters came out as lesbian.

With regards to siblings, a range of studies, including Gorman-Murray (2008) and Toomey and Richardson (2009), suggested that young lesbian and gay people often come out to their siblings before coming out to their parents, generally to test the waters and to assess the potential consequences. Sometimes, they also seek their sibling's support in coming out to their parents (Beatty, 1999; Savin-Williams, 1998). Although research that compares siblings' reactions to parents' reactions is scant, the first disclosure within a family is often to a sibling (Toomey & Richardson, 2009). Although siblings are generally supportive (Gorman-Murray, 2008), a few studies (Kadushin, 1996; Toomey & Richardson, 2009) found that sisters were more likely to support and affirm their lesbian/gay siblings than brothers would generally do. Heterosexual brothers, Morrow (2004) noted, are more likely than any other family member to react with violence to a lesbian/gay sibling.

## 9 | CONCLUSION

Overall, review of the extant literature suggests that the idea that parents resort to extreme measures in rejecting their lesbian and gay children, such as expelling them from home or physical abuse, is not unrealistic but is inapplicable to most cases included in recent studies of young lesbian and gay people's relationship with their parents. The extant literature also suggests that most parents feel stressed about the disclosure of their child's sexuality. They are often shocked and surprised by their child's coming out and perceive the situation as a crisis. Most parents want to continue having a loving and affectionate relationship with their children after learning that they are lesbian or gay. Many, however, engage in protracted attempts to persuade their child to live a heteronormative life. Parents often fear extended family members' treatment of their child, the sexual health of their child, their job prospects, and their social standing as a lesbian/gay person. These anxieties and stresses take a toll on many parents; however, over time, parents' attitudes toward their child stabilize, which could range from absolute rejection, denial and partial forms of acceptance to full acceptance.

This study makes two contributions to our understanding of parental acceptance. One, parents may not reject their lesbian and gay children as commonly as was claimed in earlier studies (e.g., D'Augelli et al., 1998; Muller, 1987). It may, however, also not be practical to extend the liberalizing of societal attitudes toward homosexuality (Loftus, 2001) to families. Although the victories of lesbian and gay social movements and the positive portrayals of lesbian and gay characters in the media have increased, few cases suggest that parents have no difficulty accepting their children after they come out. Recent studies show that, although many parents accept their lesbian and gay children, most do not do so immediately. The process of gradual acceptance is often intricate and perplexing, involving grief and uncertainty.

Two, the success in achieving parental acceptance largely varies not as a result of parents' preconceived notions of homosexuality shaped by society and communities of affiliation, but because of

the variability in access to resources for parents. Supportive family members, access to lesbian and gay support groups and resources, networks of families raising lesbian and gay children, and counseling and family-based therapy are effective in guiding parents toward acceptance. Yet, not all parents have access to such resources. Goodrich (2009) argued that most parents would eventually accept their lesbian and gay children if they have access to information, support groups, and educational resources.

There are also, however, several gaps in the extant literature, which should be addressed in future research. Except for a few studies (e.g., Belmont and Holmes, 2016), little attention has been paid to parental acceptance of young people belonging to other non-heterosexual identities, such as asexuality, gray ace, bisexuality and pansexuality. Most scholars have either exclusively studied lesbian and gay people (e.g., Carastathis et al., 2017 and Elizur and Mintzer, 2001 and 2003) or have examined bisexual individuals under the umbrella of LGB, while focusing mostly on lesbian and gay people (e.g., Bebes et al., 2015 and Chrisler, 2017). Future research may examine how the processes of coming out and parental acceptance for asexual, gray ace, bisexual, and pansexual people might differ from that of lesbian and gay people.

Future research should also focus on non-traditional families, such as foster families, single-parent families, and same-sex families, to shed light on how young lesbian and gay people's experiences differ in those families as compared to in traditional heteronormative families. Previous research (McCormick, Schmidt, & Terrazas, 2016) showed that parental acceptance in foster families could be more complicated because of young lesbian and gay people's earlier negative experiences within their biological families. These experiences might be further examined to understand the role of the attitudes of lesbian and gay children toward foster parents in parental acceptance. Examining single-parent and same-sex families may provide further insights on, in particular, how parents' attitudes toward their lesbian/gay child is affected by their not being orthodox or heterosexual. Recently, it has been suggested that single mothers from working class backgrounds may accept their gay child more readily than mothers in traditional middle-class families would do (Ghosh, 2019). Similarly, since we know that acceptance may

be easier for bisexual parents in traditional familial settings (van Bergen and Spiegel, 2014), more research examining same-sex families is needed to understand how non-heterosexual parents react to the knowledge of their child being lesbian/gay and whether and how they manage parental acceptance differently.

By unraveling the complexities of parental acceptance further, future research may also be inspired by Livingston and Fourie's (2016, p. 1647) view of parental acceptance as "a complex and ongoing dialectical and reconciliatory process." This view contrasts with the overall suggestion made by most studies that, though transitioning to acceptance is a process, once it is achieved it may be considered complete. In traditional families, parental acceptance is often practiced within the norms of heteronormative culture, which continues to present a challenge to the acceptance of lesbian and gay children (Ghosh, 2019; Hickey & Grafsky, 2017). Therefore, future research should explore whether the achievement of parental acceptance is a one-time outcome or is a process that continues to evolve over time and across situations. Examining the processual and contingent nature of parental acceptance may help family-based counselors and therapists identify patterns that alter the nature and extent of parental acceptance as families encounter new situations and challenges. These patterns may be useful in designing suitable interventions for continual therapeutic care for families raising lesbian and gay children. Further research on the ongoing dynamics in familial relations of young lesbian and gay people, as well that of asexual, bisexual, gray ace, and pansexual individuals, is necessary for the support of these individuals and their families.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the article, the terms “lesbian” and “gay” are inclusive of cisgender and transgender individuals who identify as lesbian and gay, respectively. With reference to the demographics of the

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respondent samples used in the empirical studies reviewed in this article, the term “young” implies people in their adolescence and 20s.

<sup>2</sup> Zeininger et al. (2017) identified three realistic concerns that parents often have when they become aware of their lesbian/gay child’s sexuality. Parents wonder how their children’s physical and emotional health will be impacted by their sexual identity, how their extended family and friends will react, and how being gay will affect their child’s social status. Goodrich (2009) observed that parents often feel afraid of or anguished over the homophobic reactions that their lesbian/gay child might experience from family members at events involving extended family.

<sup>3</sup> Elizur and Mintzer (2001) argued that, although parental acceptance and parental support are interrelated variables, they should not be conflated. Parental support refers to the general support that parents are willing to offer. While offering support, they might choose to overlook the sexual identity of their child. For example, several scholars, including Freedman (2008) and Hickey and Gafsky (2017), found that, in Christian families, parents can be supportive of their lesbian/gay child by viewing them as a person and not as a lesbian/gay Christian. Although they do not support homosexuality, believing that heterosexuality is not necessary for salvation and that one should “love the sinner, and not the sin,” prevents the rupture of the parent-child relationship. Nielson (2017) examined the Family Acceptance Project’s initiative of releasing a pamphlet titled *Supportive Families, Healthy Children: Helping Latter-day Saint Families with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Children*, which guides families belonging to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the practice of gay-inclusive behaviors—without having to compromise on their negative attitudes toward homosexuality—that might prevent risky sexual behavior, the use of controlled substances, or suicidal ideation.

Parental acceptance is known to be more effective than general parental support for the psychological wellbeing of young lesbian and gay people. Parental acceptance may moderate the transformation of suicidal ideation into substance use (Padilla et al., 2010). On the other hand, Feinstein, Wadsworth, Davila, and Goldfried (2014) found that general parental support may not moderate the transformation of stress into depressive symptoms. Gibson and Macleod (2012) found that young gay and lesbian children were often unable to differentiate between a supportive parent and an accepting parent. When they described their parents as “accepting,” it showed that they exhibited loving and supportive behaviors, but they also mentioned their heterosexist talk and subtle beliefs that their child was a deviant. Although the latter is hurtful to children, these comments are often softened by the support that they perceive from their parents.

<sup>4</sup> Savin-Williams (1990) found that 32 percent of mothers and 23 percent of fathers accepted their gay/lesbian child, whereas 10 percent of mothers and 22 percent of fathers rejected their child. The rest showed varying degrees of acceptance. Broadly, the percentages of total rejection and total acceptance were roughly equal (10 to 15 percent), and 70 to 75 percent of parents fell somewhere in between.