

2016

# When a Parent Comes Out: The Experience of Christian College Students Who Have a Parent Come Out as Homosexual

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WHEN A PARENT COMES OUT: THE EXPERIENCE OF CHRISTIAN COLLEGE  
STUDENTS WHO HAVE A PARENT COME OUT AS HOMOSEXUAL

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A thesis

Presented to

The School of Social Sciences, Education & Business  
Department of Higher Education and Student Development  
Taylor University  
Upland, Indiana

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

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by

Celeste H. Ryan

May 2016

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**Higher Education and Student Development  
Taylor University  
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Thesis of

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entitled

When a Parent Comes Out: The Experience of Christian College Students Who Have A  
Parent Come Out As Homosexual

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

Master of Arts degree  
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### Abstract

Research has continually indicated that a family member disclosing a homosexual identity creates a traumatic experience for those they disclose to. This reality proves especially true when a parent discloses a homosexual identity to their children and even more so when faith plays a role in the family atmosphere. The present study looked at the experience of four Christian college students whose parents had come out to them in order to find commonalities. The researcher asked the following questions in order to understand this phenomenon:

- (a) What is the experience of college students at faith-based institutions who have a parent disclose a homosexual identity?*
- (b) What effects do the faith of the individual and the college environment have on the experience?*

The researcher found six themes between the experiences of all four participants: family relationships, faith development, impact of college environment, learning to disclose, sexual identity development, and present view of homosexuality. The most significant finding emerged as the importance of disclosing the parent's identity to safe and supportive individuals and the potential mental health repercussions that occur when disclosure and processing do not take place.

### Acknowledgements

*To Nathaniel*, thank you for your endless support, the hours of listening and caring well, and for knowing, loving, and accepting me fully. You're my very best friend. I'm forever thankful for who you are, and for our beautiful, terrifying adventure.

*To my baby girl*, you were not apart of my plan for my time in MAHE, but you have been the biggest blessing. Thank you for the joy, trust, and love you have already taught me, and for being my constant pal. I can't wait to meet you.

*To Sara James*, thank you for your bold truth, for your example, for the laughter and advice, and for teaching me and caring for me well. Your friendship, support, and leadership have meant everything to me.

*To Sara Hightower*, your gentle loving kindness is such a blessing. Thank you for the meaningful conversations and the thoughtful questions, and for being someone I can be completely honest with. You inspire me.

*To Cohort 8*, thank you for challenging and encouraging me. What an unexpected and amazing two years. We did it.

*To Tim*, I am thankful for the friendship we have developed over the last two years. I have grown so much as a result of your honesty.

*To Carol*, thank you for your support and guidance throughout my thesis process.

*To my professors*, thank you for pushing us and passing your wisdom on to us. You are each excellent educators, and I appreciate you.

*To my participants*, it was an honor to hear your stories. Thank you for trusting me.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Chapter 1 Introduction .....	1
Problem Statement.....	2
Purpose.....	2
Research Questions.....	4
Chapter 2 Literature Review .....	5
Reaction to Family Member Coming Out .....	5
Dealing with Divorce.....	10
Grief.....	13
Faith-Based Institutions .....	17
College Student Development Theories .....	17
Chapter 3 Methodology .....	19
Approach and Design.....	19
Participants.....	19
Procedure .....	20
Data Analysis.....	20
Chapter 4 Results .....	21
Theme 1: Family Relationships .....	21

Theme 2: Faith Development.....	25
Theme 3: Impact of College Environment.....	27
Theme 4: Learning to Disclose.....	31
Theme 5: Sexual Identity Development .....	36
Theme 6: Present View of Homosexuality .....	38
Conclusion .....	41
Chapter 5 Discussion .....	42
Exploration of Themes and Previous Literature .....	42
Limitations of Research .....	48
Implications for Practice .....	49
Future Research .....	51
Conclusion .....	52
References.....	53
Appendix A: Survey Questions .....	58
Appendix B: Taylor University Informed Consent .....	60

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

In the last twenty years, a massive shift in societal views of homosexuality has occurred. In May 2004, Massachusetts became the first state to allow same-sex marriage (Avery et al., 2007). Only 11 years later, as of April 2015, an additional 36 states allow same-sex marriage (Powell, Quadlin, & Pizmony-Levy, 2015). This shift indicates a growing tolerance of and acceptance for homosexuality in America. With this shift has come a freedom and safety for many to disclose their own sexual identity. Specifically, closeted homosexuals have felt the freedom to disclose their homosexual identity to their close friends and family. While this choice may prove a positive experience for the homosexual, it can simultaneously become a jarring experience for the people closest to that person. When the closeted individual is in a heterosexual marriage that includes children, the situation can become even more complicated.

In a country where homosexuality has become part of the norm, some parents seem to accept their homosexual identity, coming out to their spouses and children. Similarly to parents who wait until their children enter college to divorce (Bulduc, Caron, & Logue, 2007), could it be supposed that parents wait until their children enter college to disclose a homosexual identity as well? Unfortunately, little appears known about this phenomena and the frequency of its occurrence; however, the college students who experience it endure emotional turmoil. Students with homosexual parents experience

something few peers or supporters can understand. They process the new sexual identity of their parent, potentially deal with a parental divorce, and go through the grieving process, all while on their college campus. Individually, each of these events has significant emotional and psychological effects (Buldoc et al., 2007; Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014; Savin-Williams, 2001). When endured all at once, the overall experience can prove traumatizing for college students.

### **Purpose of Study**

This study sought to explore the commonalities in the experience of college students at faith-based institutions who had a parent disclose a homosexual identity. Further, the study endeavored to understand what role both faith and the faith-based college environment had in that experience. Understanding these unique aspects of the college experience provided a context for what these students go through and how higher education professionals can support them and meet their needs.

### **Definitions**

**Reaction to a family member coming out.** Because this situation proves a somewhat uncommon occurrence, minimal published research existed on how children might react to a parent disclosing a homosexual identity, while no research published to date has addressed the reaction of college students. However, research on how parents and family members reacted to a child or another relative coming out was abundant (Herdt & Koff, 2000; Phillips & Ancis, 2008; Robinson, Walters, & Skeen, 1989; Savin-Williams, 2001). For this reason, the literature primarily reviewed the reactions of parents and family members to the homosexual identity disclosure to another relative. According

to Savin-Williams (2001), parents usually experienced emotions ranging from shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

**Dealing with divorce .** One implication of a parent coming out as homosexual is the possibility that college students undergoing it have experienced a divorce during their lifetime as well, either years before the disclosure or at the time of the disclosure. Researchers have abundantly studied the effects of parental divorce on children (Buldoc et al., 2007; Halligan, Chang, & Knox, 2014; Jónsson, Njarðvik, Ólafsdóttir, & Grétarsson, 2000; Knox, Zusman, & DeCuzzi, 2004; Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993), and findings indicated that divorce has deeper effects the younger the age of the child at the time of divorce (Buldoc et al., 2007; Jónsson, et al., 2000; Knox et al., 2004; Zill et al., 1993). However, regardless of when it occurred, a parental divorce affects college students both emotionally and relationally, and factoring a divorce into the experience provides a deeper understanding of the experience of college students who have a parent come out.

**Grief.** The presence of grief offers a trend in literature on the reaction of family members to a relative's homosexual identity disclosure (Borhek, 1983; Corley, 1990; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Robinson et al., 1989; Savin-Williams, 2001). Family members and parents grieve the loss of the relative they thought they knew as well as the loss of their hopes for the individual (Borhek, 1983; Savin-Williams, 2001). Grief affects college students in various negative ways, particularly in their relationships and academics (Clark, 2015; Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014).

**Faith-based institutions.** Because of the views surrounding sexuality and marriage often held by students, faculty, and administration at Christian colleges and

universities, the experience of students at faith-based institutions who have a parent come out appears particularly unique. In order to understand this setting and the pressures that come with it, it is important to understand the current climate towards homosexuality at institutions like the one where this study took place.

**College student development theories.** Understanding any experience of college students requires an understanding of college student development theories. For the present study, it proved helpful to examine faith development and sexual development in college students, as the literature brought up questions in both areas. In particular, the Faith Development Theory by Parks (2000) provided context for college students' spirituality and how a parental homosexual disclosure might have affected their faith (Evans et al., 2010). Additionally, in the Model of Sexual Orientation Identity Formation, Cass (1979) offered a framework for the sexual identity development of the college students, a crucial research product, as one of the potential reactions to a student's parent coming out included the questioning of their own sexual identity.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the present research, which sought to answer these specific inquiries: (a) What is the experience of college students at faith-based institutions who have a parent disclose a homosexual identity? (b) What effects do the faith of the individual and the college environment have on the experience?

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

Understanding the experience of college students at faith-based institutions who have a parent come out as homosexual required an understanding of several areas: (1) how college students react to homosexual disclosure, (2) how divorce affects college students, (3) how college students experience grief, (4) how the campus climate of faith-based institutions might affect students, and (5) how college students develop both spiritually and sexually.

#### **Reaction to Family Member Coming Out**

**Reaction of parents and families.** While little research addresses the reactions of children to their parents coming out, many studies have explored the reactions of parents and families to the homosexual identity disclosure of children and other family members (Herdt & Koff, 2000; Phillips & Ancis, 2008; Robinson, et al., 1989; Savin-Williams, 2001). The reaction of parents and families when a family member comes out provided some insight about how college students might respond if their parent comes out. Not surprisingly, most research highlighted the initial reaction to the disclosure as the most difficult emotional hurdle of the process. Savin-Williams (2001) identified six possible initial reactions by parents to a child's homosexual identity disclosure: shock, denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Similar reactions emerged in research completed by Robinson et al. (1989), who established regret, confusion, and

denial as parents' most common reactions to a child's homosexuality. Some parents also experienced guilt, which stemmed from blaming themselves for their child's orientation and wondering what they did wrong as a parent to cause the seemingly abnormal sexuality. A family in a case study by Bishop and Allen (2011) recalled feeling the need to keep the disclosure a secret from people outside of the family for fear of judgment.

Comparatively, Herdt and Koff (2000) found shame and guilt contribute to disintegration, the first of three stages in the process of accepting a child's homosexual identity. In the second stage—ambivalence—parents tried to find ways to include the gay family member into their lives and began to view the situation more positively. Additionally, in this stage, some family members began looking for literature to gain knowledge on homosexuality in order to better understand their homosexual relative (Bishop & Allen, 2011). The final stage—integration—occurred when parents realized they could not change their child, choosing instead to integrate them fully into their family (Herdt & Koff, 2000).

While many parents initially viewed their child's homosexual orientation as a challenging and traumatic life event, most eventually believed they experience personal growth and development because of their child's orientation (Phillips & Ancis, 2008). Of the 402 parents surveyed in research by Robinson et al. (1989), 97% said they eventually reached acceptance of their child's orientation. According to Borhek (1983) and Bishop and Allen (2011), families experienced a coming-out process as well, as they shared the disclosure of their family member with those closest with them and learned to select with whom they shared the family member's sexual identity, particularly learning not to share with individuals who would discriminate against the family member. Parents and families

have to learn how to navigate who they can trust, who needs to know about the disclosure, and how they will share the information (Borhek, 1983).

**Reaction of siblings.** While most research about family response to homosexual disclosure focused on the reactions of the parents, some research also delved into the reactions of siblings to another sibling's homosexual disclosure. Similar to the reactions of parents, most siblings initially reacted with shock, feeling as though they knew their sibling and realizing they did not (Hilton & Syzmanski, 2011). In contrast, a small number of participants in Hilton and Syzmanski's research initially experienced happiness for and acceptance of their sibling upon learning of their sexual identity. Half of the 14 participants felt frustrated, angry, annoyed, disappointed, or upset with their parents' negative response to their siblings' orientation. Similar to the findings of parents' relationship to their homosexual child, most siblings of homosexuals stated their relationship with their sibling experienced a positive change due to more openness and communication between them, although some siblings said their sibling's disclosure negatively affected an already poor relationship. This finding may indicate the importance of a good relationship prior to the disclosure for a good relationship to continue after the disclosure.

Further, gender may play a role in the way siblings react to homosexual disclosure. A study conducted by D'Augelli, Grossman, and Starks (2007) found sisters of homosexual youth as more likely to know about the sexual identity of their sibling. Additionally, male siblings proved more likely to respond negatively to their sibling's homosexual disclosure. Because of the typically younger age of siblings in comparison to

parents, their reactions could have provided more indication to the experience of similarly aged children with homosexual parents.

**Reaction of children.** In comparison to the research on parents' reaction to a child coming out, a limited amount of research existed on the reaction of children when their parents came out. One qualitative study examined the experience of women whose mothers came out as lesbians later in life (Davies, 2008). Unfortunately, Davies' research did not focus on the reactions of the daughters or their path towards acceptance but instead focused on five themes seen in the process of all six daughter participants: perception, knowledge, relationship, sexual identity, and overall process. Notable points in her research include (1) half of the six participants questioned their own sexual identity upon learning their mothers identified as lesbian, (2) half reported maintaining close relationships with their mothers during their coming-out process, and (3) five participants had no idea prior to the disclosure that their mothers identified as lesbian.

**Religion and reaction to coming out.** In recent decades, religion and homosexuality have often seemed on the opposite side of the same argument, and, because of this, many consider religion as one of the biggest factors in a negative response to a homosexual disclosure (Kircher & Ahlijah, 2011). The foundational research by Savin-Williams (2001) supported the idea that religion often caused parental denial of a child's homosexual identity and often indicated a lack of improvement after an initially negative response to disclosure. In contrast, Herdt and Koff (2000) found religion had little to no effect on how parents handled their child's coming-out process. However, the authors stated this finding may more strongly indicated a skewed sample than actually capturing a pattern in the experience of religious parents with children who

come out as homosexual; the parents used in this particular study all participated in a Parents and Families of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) group, which served to aid in the transition of families with homosexual children. Conversely, Kircher and Ahlajah (2011) discovered, while religion had a *negative* impact on the child who comes out, religion had a *positive* impact on the parents of the child, as faith convictions helped them “accept their LGBT children by teaching them the importance of love, faith, and family” (p. 12).

The religious views of parents with homosexual children become affected in a variety of ways. After the initial reaction, many parents distanced themselves from their belief systems if they came in conflict with their child’s sexual identity (Kircher & Ahlajah, 2011; Phillips & Ancis, 2008). Other parents changed their church affiliation to one more supportive and accepting of homosexuality (Kircher & Ahlajah, 2011; Phillips & Ancis, 2008). Some parents in the research by Kircher and Ahlajah (2011) stayed in their church as spokespeople for the LGBT community. All parent participants stated they believed religion needed to show more support of the lesbian and gay community in general. One parent in the 2008 study by Phillips and Ancis served as a pastor in a denomination that considered homosexuality a sin. At first, he attempted to change his son’s sexual identity through counseling, but eventually the pastoral father realized he could not change his son:

I decided very early on, I didn’t understand it, but my relationship with my son was more important than anything. I needed to support him as best I could . . .

And, I guess somewhere in this I began to realize that, um, I could not pick . . .

who they chose to live with, who they chose to love . . . it was a struggle. But it got easier. (p. 141)

After this event, the church he pastored began to focus most of its ministry on lesbians and gays in the community (Phillips & Ancis, 2008). Every parent in Phillip and Ancis' research, which included 17 parents, eventually decided loving their children was more important than the parents' beliefs, although some shared stories of families who had been torn apart by their children's sexual orientation. These findings provided insight into possible responses of religious individuals who have a family member come out.

**Other factors affecting family member reactions.** According to Savin-Williams (2001), literature explored little about the factors affecting how parents and other family members react to the disclosure of another family member's homosexual orientation. However, several theories existed. One theory posits the age of the child's disclosure affected the parents' reaction; the younger the individual at the time of disclosure, parents more likely considered the sexual identity a phase; however, parents more likely took the disclosure seriously if the individual disclosed during young adulthood. Another theory depended on parents' age at the time of the disclosure: older parents tended toward more conservatism. Gender also potentially played a role in the way a family member handled the disclosure. Bishop and Allen (2011) indicated women as more "volatile and relationally oriented, focusing on closeness and distance," while the men seemed "more controlled, intentional, and explicit in their sharing" (p. 105). Other proposed factors that affected family member reaction included family culture, parenting style, ethnicity, and sex-role orientation (Savin-Williams, 2001), though little research explored these topics.

### **Dealing with Divorce**

In some instances, a parent coming out might lead to a divorce, forcing a college student to deal with multiple life changes at once. Research indicated that parental

divorce had significant effects on children, both emotionally and relationally (Buldoc et al., 2007; Halligan et al., 2014; Jónsson, et al., 2000; Knox et al., 2004; Zill et al., 1993).

**Emotional effects of divorce.** College students who found out their parents planned to divorce responded with an array of emotions, including shock, surprise, happiness, relief, anger, hurt, guilt, and anxiety (Buldoc et. al., 2007). Additionally, students experienced higher levels of stress caused by sensing pressure to take sides, trying to protect siblings, and feeling angry and hurt with a parent. Furthermore, college students with divorced parents reported feelings of worry or anxiety regarding a future marriage because of their parent's failed marriage. However, college students of divorced parents felt committed not to divorce if they married, as they had personal experience with the effects of parental divorce (Halligan, et al., 2014). More positively, students experienced growth from the situation making them stronger and by becoming more independent as a result of the divorce (Buldoc et. al., 2007; Halligan, et al., 2014). When parents divorced during a child's time in college, students suggested the divorce became easier to handle because they no longer lived at home (Buldoc et. al., 2007).

For some students, the divorce could have taken place years prior to a parent coming out, resulting in these students dealing with both the long-term emotional effects of the divorce as well as the impact of the parent's homosexual disclosure. According to Zill et al. (1993), 18-22 year olds from divorced backgrounds seemed twice as likely to show high levels of emotional distress or problem behavior and to have received psychological help at some point since the divorce. In addition, Short (2002) found children from divorced families have a "chronic strain" (p. 151) of stress that affected them both psychologically and psychosocially and led to the onset of mental health issues

such as depression, anxiety, antisocial behavior, avoidant coping, and an overall negatively affected well-being. Further, young adults from divorced backgrounds reported significantly higher sexual promiscuity than their peers from non-divorced backgrounds (Jónsson, et al., 2000; Sprague & Kinney, 1997). Not only did they seem more sexually promiscuous, but they also started having sex at a younger age if their parents divorced when they were young (Sprague & Kinney, 1997).

Additionally, college students whose parents remarried reported significantly more unhappiness than those whose parents did not divorce or remarry (Knox et al., 2004). Primarily, this finding resulted from the lost hope of parents reuniting, which had significant implications for the children of homosexual parents with a committed partner; in particular, if the parent and the partner married, the children might have already felt unhappy without the additional component of a homosexual identity.

**Relational effects of divorce.** Time and time again, research indicated parental divorce causes a growth in the mother-child relationship and a strain in the father-child relationship (Buldoc et. al., 2007; Halligan, et al., 2014; Knabb & Pelletier, 2013; Knox et al., 2004). This difference proved due in part to the fact most children lived with their mothers post-divorce (Halligan et al., 2014). Attachment to the mother after a divorce predicted less psychological distress in college freshmen (Hannum & Dvorak, 2004).

Outside of the parent relationship, divorce affected romantic relationships as well. Research completed by Knox et al., (2004) indicated children from divorced backgrounds as more likely than children from non-divorced homes to be in romantic relationships for a year or more. Theoretically, the tendency toward longer-term relationships came from a motivation to maintain their romantic relationships due to their parents' failed romantic

relationship. However, Sprague and Kinney (1997) found children of divorced parents had lower levels of trust and selfless love in their relationships and had more problems finding love and companionship than their peers from non-divorced backgrounds. Additionally, females had more difficulty expressing their feelings out of fear of getting hurt like their mothers. Evidently, divorce had a massive effect on the emotional well-being and the relationships of college students and thus, theoretically, could play a role in the experience of Christian college students who have a parent come out.

### **Grief**

It is crucial to remember a student experiencing a parent coming out is a student in grief. Grief represents the natural reaction to any kind of loss (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014); though not experiencing a death, students in this situation certainly experienced a loss; they must change in how they viewed their parent and potentially endure a parental divorce as well.

**Grief and homosexual identity disclosure of a family member.** Most research on accepting the homosexual identity of a family member came to a similar conclusion: accepting the new identity comes in a grieving process (Borhek, 1983; Corley, 1990; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Robinson et al., 1989; Savin-Williams, 2001). Almost all parents of homosexual individuals experienced stages of grief similar to the stages outlined by Kübler-Ross (1969): shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Robinson et al., 1989; Savin-Williams, 2001). Robinson et al. (1989), in a survey of 402 parents, became the first to identify the five stages of grief in the acceptance process of parents, although parents usually experienced the stages in any order (Borhek, 1983; Robinson et al., 1989; Savin-Williams, 2001). Parents mourned the loss of their dreams

for their child, particularly a future marriage and future grandchildren (Borhek, 1983; Savin-Williams, 2001). Additionally, parents grieved their “normal” family and the child they thought they knew, as well as their child’s abandonment of their own values. Interestingly, most parents did not recognize their grief during their child’s coming-out process, unaware of experiencing any kind of loss (Borhek, 1983).

Notably, all the grief stages represented healthy parts of processing a homosexual identity and should be encouraged (Corley, 1990). Shock manifested especially in the initial reaction of family members to the disclosure (Savin-Williams, 2001). In the denial stage, family members acted as though the disclosure never occurred and distanced themselves from the homosexual family member. Anger often occurred when the homosexual identity could no longer be denied, with familial emotions ranging from annoyance to rage. In the bargaining phase, family members offered their homosexual family member alternatives to homosexuality. For example, family members might tell their homosexual relative the tendencies will disappear if they pray hard enough. When bargaining did not work, as proved the case in the vast majority of circumstances, the resistant family members became depressed, leading to the final stage of grief in which they accepted their family member’s homosexual identity. Corley (1990) recognized *accepting* does not necessarily mean *approving*; rather, “acceptance is the acknowledgment of the state of things” (p. 42). Essentially, college students process through a number of feelings, thoughts, and beliefs while simultaneously navigating their parent’s new sexual identity.

**Grief and the college environment.** Even without the added variable of parental homosexual disclosure, little about the college environment proves conducive to dealing

with grief (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014). However, understanding the general grieving process of college students on their campuses offered further awareness and perspective on this current study's topic. Grieving students often felt alone and "out of place" (Clark, 2015; Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014, p. 83) in comparison to their peers, who focused on relationships, classes, and social events; in contrast, grieving students processed through issues like "meaning, life, and death" (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014, p. 83). Grieving students tended to judge their peers for their superficial concerns, while also wishing they had the same concerns. Because of this difference, grieving students tended to feel disconnected from and envious of their peers.

Additionally, the space of a college did not lend itself to the process of grief. Grieving students struggled to find the privacy to process, as few spaces for solitude or having conversations with others about their grief existed on a college campus (Clark, 2015; Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014). Additionally, the number of students on college campuses made grieving students feel overwhelmed (Clark, 2015). Even when in their own rooms, students felt surrounded by roommates or suitemates and felt they could never be alone to grieve (Clark, 2015; Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014). Students also had trouble grieving away from home, especially with the knowledge that their family members were grieving as well (Clark, 2015). Because of the college space, college students experiencing grief appeared at a higher risk to enter into unhealthy or prolonged grief caused by the inability to process through their experience (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014).

Further, the college environment included other stressors outside of what grieving college students experienced. The stress caused in college by academics, extracurricular

activities, parental expectations, race, and culture affected students exponentially (Kadison and DiGeronimo, 2004). The competitive nature of campuses caused a deep focus on academic studies in particular (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014; Kadison and DiGeronimo, 2004). However, grief particularly affected concentration, memory, focus, and motivation, often causing those experiencing grief to do poorly in their studies (Balk, 2011; Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014). Balk (2011) also found grieving students had trouble functioning at a normal level and achieving commonplace tasks, such as going to class or completing assignments. Grief affected college students on a number of levels, and understanding this grief provided deeper context in understanding the experiences of students who have a parent come out.

Higher education professionals must remain aware of the needs of grieving students in order to aid them in their grieving process. Clark (2015) focused primarily on how grieving college students felt supported within the residence halls; peer support and discussing their grief emerged as crucial parts of the experience. Peer support proved most effective when coming from someone the griever felt in close relationship with prior to the loss, and the grieving students considered support unhelpful when cliché or too inquisitive. However, grieving students also feared their grief would become a burden to the people around them. Participants in Clark's study also indicated that discussing their grief helped them in the grieving process. Clark's findings supported that of Balk (2011), who found grieving college students viewed safe places, helpful people close to the grieving individual, and comfortable situations as most helpful students. In order to help students move through grief in a healthy way, it prove crucial to understand how college students feel best supported in the grieving process.

**Faith-Based Institutions**

Understanding the campus climate and pressures unique to faith-based institutions proves vital to understanding a Christian college student who has a parent come out, as their environment plays a role in their experience. Faith-based institutions, and the students who attend them, tend to hold fairly traditional views of marriage, divorce, and sexuality. In their research, Yarhouse, Stratton, Dean, and Brooke (2009) discovered the vast majority of 104 undergraduate students who identified as sexual minorities believed their campus viewed same-sex attraction and homosexual behavior as negative. Additionally, the same study found sexual minorities cited their peers, not faculty members or administration, as the biggest cause of the aforementioned negativity (Yarhouse, et al., 2009). Furthermore, another survey of Christian college students who identified as sexual minorities found most of them held traditionally conservative views of sexuality, despite their own sexual identity. As a whole, navigating sexuality remains an ongoing conversation at faith-based institutions (Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016). Thus, students with a homosexual parent at Christian colleges have unique experiences.

**College Student Development Theories**

In order to understand better the experiences of Christian college students who have a parent come out as homosexual, the researcher looked into the developmental theory of college students, particularly spiritual and sexual development. Because of the common tension between religion and homosexuality and considering the environment from which this study's participants came, delving into faith development provided a context for college students' spiritual standpoints. In particular, the Faith Development Theory by Parks (2000) looked specifically at faith development that occurred in young

adulthood, dividing it into three areas: cognition, dependence, and community (Evans et al., 2010). As young adults developed cognitively in regard to their faith, they transitioned from basing all their trust in authorities in their life and what they say to beginning to think and make choices and belief commitments for themselves. The shift in dependence became similarly apparent as young adults learned inner dependence, connecting what they learned from the world around them to their own views and beliefs. Finally, young adults grew in their understanding of community as they learned to surround themselves with people who shared their beliefs and interests.

A previously mentioned study by Davies (2008) indicated a tendency for daughters of lesbians to question their own sexual identity as a result of their mother coming out. The Model of Sexual Orientation Identity Formation by Cass (1979) provided stages that identified students' potential point in their homosexual identity development (Evans et al, 2010). Presumably, students who might question their sexual identity because of their parents' disclosure operated from the prestage of Cass' Model. In the prestage, individuals assumed their own heterosexuality until they experienced some kind of conflict that changed their perception. A parent coming out could potentially provide the conflict that caused students to question their own sexual identity.

### **Conclusion**

The current literature indicated little about how college students might react if a parent disclosed a homosexual identity, even without the added component of faith and spirituality. In order to understand better a phenomenon that seemed little understood and little researched, the current study investigated the experiences of individuals with a parent who came out during their time in college.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Methodology**

##### **Approach and Design**

To explore the phenomena within the experience of college students at faith-based institutions who have a parent disclose a homosexual identity, the researcher used a qualitative phenomenological research design. Phenomenological research concerns “the study of experience from the perspective of the individual” (Lester, 1999, p. 1) and the “phenomenological perspective. . . seeks the meanings of experiences” (Smith, 2007, p. 29). By using a phenomenological design, the researcher explored and found themes within the experiences of Christian college students who have a parent come out.

##### **Participants**

The study took place at a small, private, faith-based institution in the Midwest. The researcher used purposeful sampling to identify participants who had experienced the phenomena described. At age 18 or older, participants met the following inclusion criteria: participants (a) will have experienced one parent disclosing a homosexual identity during their time in college and (b) must still be students at the institution.

The researcher contacted the institution’s Dean of Students for permission to seek participants through purposeful sampling within the office of Student Affairs, particularly targeting Residence Life and counseling services. Upon receiving permission to proceed, the researcher contacted the Directors of Residence Life and counseling services for

potential participants and requested permission to contact the potential participants.

Initial communication with possible participants consisted of an email that explained the purpose of the study and requested participation. The researcher sought to locate up to 8 participants but, after many obstacles, secured four participants.

### **Procedure**

After identifying participants, the researcher conducted individual interviews, each lasting approximately 60 minutes. The interviews consisted of 8 to 10 open-ended questions, allowing the participant to “voice their experience unconstrained by any perspectives of the researcher or past research findings” (Creswell, 2008, p. 225).

To ensure the confidentiality of all data, the interview recordings and transcriptions stayed in a secure location known only by the researcher. The researcher gave pseudonyms to all participants to maintain privacy. Additionally, all interviews took place in a private conference room. The researcher worked closely with counseling services to ensure communication with participants was handled with care and concern. Participants received information concerning resources provided by counseling services.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher recorded and transcribed each interview; next, the researcher used a coding process to find commonalities in the experiences of participants and to identify, describe, and define themes within the data based on the commonalities (Creswell, 2008). The themes provided context for similarity of experience between participants. In order to ensure the accuracy of the identified themes, the researcher used member checking. To complete member checking, the researcher shared the results of the study with the participants, asking them to confirm the validity of the themes.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

#### **Introduction**

While specific methodological hopes and goals existed for the research—such as finding at least eight participants, having a mixture of male and female participants, and interviewing individuals whose parent had come out while the participants were in college—many challenges arose in the process of securing individuals who fit within these qualifications. Despite speaking with residence life professionals, counseling services professionals, professors, faculty members, and over 200 student leaders, the researcher only found four participants, all female. In the midst of the interviews, the researcher also found each participant's parent had come out to them during high school, not college. However, regardless of the challenges encountered, the findings of the research proved informative, and several commonalities emerged among the experience of all participants. Each interviewee discussed similar aspects of family relationships, faith development, effects of the college environment, learning to disclose, sexual identity development, and their present view of homosexuality.

#### **Theme 1: Family Relationships**

For all participants, their parent coming out drastically affected their entire family, as well as the relationships within their family. Specifically, participants

experienced changes in relationship with their gay parent, as well as with their other parent.

**Sub-theme: Relational distance from gay parent.** One consistent theme in the present research was a distance between the participants and their gay parent. In all four cases, this distance developed after the parent came out to them, despite the closeness of the relationship prior to the parent coming out. Upon disclosure, three participants described feelings of shock, denial, hurt, and anger. Erin described her experiences with denial, such as waking up the following morning and view the disclosure experience as simply a dream. She also described a few moments when she forgot about her mother's homosexual identity. Similarly, Grace described feeling anger towards her mother that continued for years. Grace shared that the way she responded caused her mother to feel angry with her as well, resulting in a very distant relationship.

Hannah indicated initial feelings of sympathy for her mother when she came out because of the way her mother explained her homosexual identity. She said,

I felt so much sympathy for her. I wasn't angry because, at her, because it came out in a way, she explained it to me like this was something she's been burdened with and she wished that she didn't have to deal with.

Despite Hannah's initial reaction, distance still developed in her relationship with her mom: "I think it made my mom be more alienated because she was living this life that [my sisters and I] didn't understand." Hannah's experience also became largely shaped by the fact that her mom had an affair with a woman while still married to her dad, which caused significant hurt for Hannah and her two sisters. Therefore, Hannah mentioned the roles in their relationship changed after her mother came out to her.

Participants indicated several reasons for distance in their relationship with their homosexual parent. The most consistent explanations for a strained relationship entailed selfishness and changes in the parent. All participants used the word “selfish” to describe their parent after coming out because the participants no longer felt like a priority to their parent. Participants felt their parent’s newfound homosexual relationships seemed more important to the parent than their relationships with their children. Grace described her mother’s selfishness as assumption that coming out would not have consequences:

She was really selfish during that time and was only thinking about herself and how things were impacting her, so that was a major division in our relationship . . . I think she expected everyone to go along with it and she felt that she was making the best decision for her, and so she wanted everyone else to see that too, and I obviously did not, so that was really hard for her.

For two participants, Erin and Grace, distance and hurt also resulted from changes noticed in the parent since coming out. Changes caused particular hurt when they seemed counter to what the parent had taught the participant as a child. Most common differences in the homosexual parent included drinking and no longer attending church. Erin said, “. . . you weren’t the mom that I grew up with. She always taught me those things weren’t ok.” Erin’s mother also started wearing men’s clothing after she came out and also moved in with her partner, despite never letting Erin be alone with boys prior to coming out. Seeing their parent act in a way incongruent with who they seemed prior to coming out proved incredibly hurtful to participants and caused distance in the relationship.

**Sub-theme: Changes in relationship with other parent.** Each participant discussed the impact on the relationship with the other parent as well. For two, the effect

proved positive, and for the other two, negative. Erin and Grace experienced a positive change in their relationship with their other parent. Erin had a severely broken relationship with her father prior to her mother coming out. However, because of the distance in the relationship with her mother, Erin and her father reconciled their relationship and became quite close. She explained, “[My dad and I] have a really great relationship, really supportive, loving, the best our relationship has ever been. He is a huge support for me, especially because my relationship with my mom is so bad.” Erin has lived with her father during breaks since the disclosure, instead of her mother, whom she had lived with since her parents’ divorce when she was four.

Grace also felt significantly closer to her father since her mother came out, though they did not have a poor relationship prior. Since her mom came out, she said,

[My dad and I] talked a lot more. And we’re a lot more open with each other. I think it was because we felt like we couldn’t really talk about what was happening with anyone else so we talked about it a lot together.

Grace’s father also started going to church with her after her mother came out, which helped improve their relationship.

While Erin and Grace experienced a positive shift in their relationships with their other parent, Hannah and Diane’s relationships became negatively affected. Prior to her mother coming out, Hannah described her relationship with her father as fine; however, her father’s response to her mom’s disclosure and the way he treated his daughters afterward caused great division in their relationship. After her mother came out, Hannah’s father became highly focused on his work and, as a result, did not focus on his children. For Hannah, the divorce caused greater issues than her mother’s disclosure,

though the two events were difficult to separate. Hannah's father has since remarried, and she shared that her dad focused all attention on his own new relationships with his wife and stepchildren, and she and her siblings felt forgotten in the process.

Diane's experience proved unique in that, while she and her mother both knew of her father's homosexual identity, they did not talk about it. Since Diane's father came out to her in eighth grade, she and her mother have only discussed it twice, and in one of those conversations, her mother told her not to share it with anyone. Because of this stipulation, a great amount of tension exists in their relationship. Diane said,

With my mom, it's always so uncomfortable if something on TV comes up about homosexuality . . . And the fact that we can't talk about it is also a way I think that it's hindered a relationship. It's hindered how deep our relationship can go.

Diane also described her relationship with her mom as "co-dependent" and unhealthy because she had to protect her mother emotionally from everything going on with her father by keeping her thoughts and emotions to herself.

## **Theme 2: Faith Development**

In addition to impacting the parent-child relationship, the parent's coming out process had vast implications on the faith development of participants. Overall, participants struggled with reconciling their parent's homosexual identity with their own faith. Hannah described how faith affected her reaction: "[My faith] did [affect my reaction] because it kept me back from being completely like, homosexuality is right. It kept me back from completely accepting the whole idea. It gave me something to wrestle with." Due to this tension, participants experienced spiritual confusion and crisis, which led to a growth in their understanding of God and growth in their spirituality as a whole.

**Sub-theme: Spiritual confusion.** Two participants indicated feeling spiritual confusion as a result of their parent coming out. Erin voiced her confusion as unanswered questions within her faith:

The biggest question that I've asked has been, why would God create somebody one way and say that it's wrong? . . . . And I guess I did question his character a little bit. You know, Lord, are you good? That was a question. Why would this happen if you were good? How does this happen? . . . . Why does it happen?

Hannah experienced confusion about what her faith said about homosexuality. She said, "My sister and I . . . at the time were very, very into our faith, so we were like, what do we do? So just kind of like, it was confusing."

**Sub-theme: Spiritual crisis.** The other two participants experienced spiritual crisis immediately after their parent came out to them and had comparable explanations of their spiritual crisis. Grace said,

I kind of had this, like probably 'come to Jesus' moment. I was like, ok, I'm at a fork in the road, and I can either be super angry and just like be mad at God and just turn away from faith, or I can just turn to it and find comfort in it and hope.

And I think, well I know, I chose the latter.

Similarly, Diane shared, "And I said to the Lord, ok, you've given this to me, I can either turn to you or run away from you. I obviously chose to turn to him."

**Sub-theme: Spiritual growth.** Finally, after the crisis and confusion, participants experienced spiritual growth as a result of their parent coming out. This growth appeared mostly in their understanding of God's character but also in their understanding of biblical concepts, such as grace and love. As research indicated, religion

and homosexuality linked closely for many individuals (Herdt & Koff, 2000; Kircher & Ahlijah, 2011; Phillips & Ancis, 2008; Savin-Williams, 2001). Because of this connection, substantial faith development could occur as a result of wrestling with hard questions and topics after a parent comes out.

### **Theme 3: Impact of College Environment**

Because all participants were in high school when their parent came out to them, entering the college environment played a significant role in their experience. All participants already knew about their parent and could remove themselves from the situation for the first time, making college a mostly positive space for them. However, a few consistent problems emerged as each participant shared their experience. Overall, the college experience felt the largest effects from the faith-based nature; the distance from issues; situations involving classes, professors, and chapel; and the physical space.

**Sub-theme: Impact of faith-based nature of university.** For the most part, participants viewed the faith-based nature of the university quite positively. Several participants indicated that learning about the Christian idea of love helped them process their parent's homosexuality. The faith-based nature of the college also provided space for participants to think about their faith in the midst of the experience of their parent coming out and resulted in helping them form an opinion. Additionally, participants felt like they could openly discuss with others how their faith affects the experience. Diane shared, "I think just having conversations with other people has been great because they are naturally faith-based. The ability to be able to speak about how the Lord has affected me in this situation so freely has been good."

However, the faith-based nature also had negative effects. Three participants expressed frustration over the “black and white” mindset of their peers, who, as Hannah phrased it, did not let “themselves interpret Scripture any other way.” Participants viewed this mentality as close-minded and prevalent on their Christian college campus. Grace expressed fears that the space often did not feel safe. She said, “I think generally there’s just an atmosphere of we’re like anti-homosexuality as a whole . . . Like I’m not homosexual, but I feel like if someone was struggling with that here they wouldn’t want to talk about it.” While the faith-based nature of the community seemed a positive aspect of the university in some situations, it also caused some issues for participants.

**Sub-theme: Space from issues to process and grieve.** The college environment additionally provided participants with space from the issues at home. Erin and Grace originally viewed this space as a means to get away from the issue. Erin shared, “When I came to school, I was like yes, I’m leaving home, I can leave this at home, I don’t have to think about it.” Similarly, Grace mentioned,

And then I came to [university] . . . I wanted to leave my family, get away, not think about it. That space was actually really good, it made me confront what I was feeling and after that, my relationship with my mom actually got a lot better. As Grace described, both eventually realized it was healthier for them to process openly and talk about their experience once they had physical and emotional distance from it.

Participants also indicated the space allowed them to process more than they had previously. Diane shared,

It was really good for me to come to [university] because I felt like I was right up against the situation, but when I stepped back I could see the whole picture. And I

could see how I was co-dependent on my mom, and I could see how it was hurtful that I couldn't tell anyone and how my community at home is different from my community at [school].

Participants also found they now had control over whom they shared their experience with, which proved helpful to their healing process. Diane said, "I have a lot of friends here [who know about my dad] because this is my area, this is my space, this is my community where I can be myself." Having a space in which they could decide who knew and could share openly became an important aspect to all participants.

**Sub-theme: Effects of classes, professors, and chapel.** When asked what aspect of the college experience made them feel unsupported, participants consistently mentioned classes, professors, and chapel. Particularly in classes, participants mentioned the strong opinions and outspokenness of their peers when the topic of homosexuality came up in discussion made them uncomfortable. Grace said,

I think sometimes in classes, hearing the opinions of others was a time when I did not feel like I could talk about it or didn't want to bring it up . . . I felt like I had kind of moved past that initial anger or, I guess, distaste for homosexuality. I was over that part, but I felt like a lot of people here still weren't, so when I heard their opinions like in class . . . I felt like I wasn't supported in how I felt, I guess.

Erin and Hannah had shared their experience with a homosexual parent in classroom settings in order to provide a different perspective on homosexuality or share about their own family dynamic. Both mentioned feeling incredibly fearful of sharing in the classroom space. Hannah also recalled hearing whispering and laughter after she shared,

as well as any time she talked about homosexuality in class afterward. She said, “I didn't necessarily feel safe in class talking about it too much. I felt judged, I really did.”

Likewise, participants commonly mentioned professors as individuals who made participants feel uncomfortable in the college setting. Erin had the most to say about her professors. She mentioned professors often openly shared their views or started discussions in class about homosexuality that felt unhelpful or from a closed-minded perspective. When participants felt such discussions were not framed to allow open discussion, or when professors started the discussion by stating their own opinions, the conversation often felt unsafe and led to peers additionally sharing strong views.

Finally, Grace and Hannah both mentioned chapel as a space that occasionally felt unsupportive to their experiences. Hannah said,

There was one [chapel speaker] that was like, you need to tell your brother, not let your brother do homosexual things. He was just like somebody going up on stage, speaking with authority and saying something is right and wrong. I didn't like that, because I was like, who are you to tell, you don't even know.

Both individuals felt frustrated when hearing definitive statements on homosexuality as a sin because they knew others on campus struggle with homosexuality, and they did not believe an absolute truth existed on the topic. Conversely, Erin and Grace mentioned chapel speakers who shared about their own experiences with homosexuality felt helpful; these perspectives gave them a lot to process and started good conversations on campus.

**Sub-theme: Effects of physical space.** For Diane in particular, the physical space of the campus became an important part of the experience. She mentioned both positive and negative features of the physical space. She viewed the residence hall setting as a

safe place in which she could access friends when she needed to talk. The rest of the participants viewed the physical space, particularly roommates or peers within their hall community, quite positively and helpful in their sharing and processing. However, Diane's view of the physical space shifted after she experienced a second wave of grief while in college when her father moved in with his partner. After this point, the smallness of campus in size and number of students became a hard aspect of her experience, particularly when she did not want to discuss what was going on. She felt as though she had adopted a mask, pretending all was fine so that people did not ask her what was wrong.

#### **Theme 4: Learning to Disclose**

For all participants, navigating disclosure of their parent's homosexual identity was a huge part of their experience. Each had to overcome their fears of disclosing, identify types of individuals who felt safe to disclose to, and learn how to challenge or support others through disclosure.

**Sub-theme: Fear of disclosing.** All participants expressed a fear of disclosing their parent's homosexual identity to others for three main reasons. The first came as the desire to protect their parent. Erin, Hannah, and Grace shared fears of others viewing their parent differently or negatively if they knew of their homosexual identity. Grace shared fears of having her mom on her campus:

I was sometimes embarrassed to have my mom here. Like if people would see her or figure that out, how would they treat her? I guess I was kind of like protective of her . . . I didn't want to have people judge me because of my mom. And then, I didn't want them to judge her because I still loved her and she was my mom.

Participants also mentioned fear of disclosing out of protection for themselves. Erin and Diane feared others would think of them as homosexual because their parent was homosexual. They conveyed that this fear came from their belief that people viewed homosexuality as genetic. Finally, Erin expressed a fear of making others uncomfortable if she shared her mother's homosexuality. All three desires—to protect their parents, to protect themselves, and not to make others uncomfortable—created a fear of disclosure that sometimes kept participants from sharing about their parent's homosexuality.

**Sub-theme: Effects of nondisclosure.** At some point, all participants struggled as a result of not disclosing their parent's homosexuality and experienced a lack of personal well-being and increased feelings of loneliness as a result. Hannah said, "I felt like there was something I couldn't tell people . . . It made me feel more isolated." While at this point, participants not only chose not to disclose their experience but also did not allow themselves to process it, which led to significant emotional implications. Erin shared,

So then I decided . . . I'm going to be super supportive and, like, love my mom and it's going to be great. And I didn't really deal with myself and like how I was processing all of this . . . that was a really bad idea because . . . I was really bitter and I was the most bipolar person with [my mom's partner].

When participants began to disclose the experience, they became significantly healthier. Grace verbalized this development in describing the process of coming to college and sharing her experience:

And I think a lot of it was, in high school I didn't have a ton of people to talk to about it, so having time to talk to more people and kind of get out all of the emotions I had been feeling . . . was really helpful.

Diane experienced the effects of not disclosing most significantly, as she could not tell anyone about her father's homosexuality due to her mother's wishes. Not disclosing—which, in turn, led to not processing—had major implications on Diane and her mental health. She said,

My junior year, because I hadn't talked to anyone about it, I experienced a lot of anxiety. I missed half of second semester junior year [of high school] . . . So I told my counselor and she said, oh there's your problem right there. You haven't shared this with anyone . . . And it's not even like I would be conscious of the fact that my anxiety was from my dad, I just experienced it. I just think it was a by-product of not being able to discuss it.

Diane's experience indicated that disclosing the experience proves crucial to students who have a parent come out as homosexual.

**Sub-theme: Safe vs. unsafe individuals.** Determining which individuals were safe or unsafe to disclose to played an important part in the disclosure process for all participants. People who felt safe to share with were those viewed as open-minded or non-judgmental, those who expressed interest in the participants' lives, and those who showed support and empathy to participants. Hannah and Erin mentioned the importance of safe individuals as non-judgmental towards homosexuality and seemingly open-minded to discussing it. Both used the word "gray" to describe those who do not see just "black and white" in a topic like homosexuality. Hannah described safe individuals as

People who were . . . more liberal, people who were more like willing to admit that the world is really gray . . . people who aren't super convicted about things to

the point that everything is black and white. So basically people who understand the messiness of this world.

Erin also described an open-minded, non-judgmental person as someone who willingly asks hard questions and challenges others.

Another characteristic of a safe person was someone who showed genuine interest in the participant. This aspect seemed of utmost importance to Diane. For her, it felt meaningful if people truly cared about her and wanted to know about her parents or life at home. She first shared with the student leaders in her residence hall: “. . . they were the first people who reached out to me, they were like, tell me your life, I want to hear everything. So that was so encouraging to me that they were interested in that way.” Diane said she only disclosed to certain individuals who displayed interest and care.

Finally, participants also described a safe person as empathetic and supportive. Such individuals not only showed empathy and support when the participant first shared but also continued to support as the participant processed. It was not clear if participants decided to share because of empathy they attributed to these individuals, or if they continued to feel safe as a result of their supportive response. Both Grace and Diane mentioned these individuals asked good questions that helped them continue to process the experience long after the initial disclosure. Similarly, Grace described the support such individuals provided:

And I think just their empathy and compassion that, though they hadn't gone through it, they were willing to still hear what I'd been through and challenge me to still grow in that, to not stay the same at where I am, but still confront those things and ask me questions about where I am now.

When describing individuals viewed as unsafe to disclose their parent's homosexuality to, participants consistently used the words "opinionated" and "conservative." Individuals with this "unsafe" mindset left little or no space for conversation or questions surrounding homosexuality. This disposition proved of particular concern to Erin, Hannah, and Grace. When asked to describe an unsafe person, Erin offered, "... super conservative, very opinionated, very black and white, like no gray area, black and white. Like homosexuality is a sin, no question about it." Hannah mentioned not wanting to share with such people for fear they would expect her to change her mom. She also mentioned simply not wanting to watch such people react to her mom's homosexuality.

Diane had a slightly different definition of an unsafe individual. She mentioned she would not disclose to someone if they had a reputation of talking about other people. In addition, if she shared with someone and they never mentioned it, she viewed them as unsafe because of their lack of support.

Interestingly, when all participants described behavior they considered supportive or unsupportive, each mentioned individuals whom they viewed as either safe or unsafe. This word choice might have indicated that finding a safe person with whom individuals could share remains one of the most significant aspects of support for participants and that the initial reaction of the individual at the moment of disclosure seemed more important than their behavior after the disclosure.

**Sub-theme: Supporting/challenging others.** Finally, all participants mentioned disclosing their parent's homosexuality out of a desire to support or challenge others. Grace and Diane both shared they had disclosed to peers experiencing family issues such

as a divorce in order to support that individual in the midst of their emotional trauma. Similarly, two participants had actually been connected after they both disclosed to the same mentor and found unique support from one another as they processed and walked through the same journey together. Both Hannah and Grace mentioned disclosing as a means to challenge others in their thinking as well. Hannah said she would disclose when the topic of homosexuality came up and when her disclosure “seemed important” for the sake of the conversation. Grace also mentioned she would share to give others more perspective or a different aspect of homosexuality. Erin and Grace mentioned the benefit of disclosing in that it has led to others sharing as a result of their vulnerability and put them in a position of offering support to others as well. Erin shared that she has since had several individuals either disclose their own homosexuality or the homosexuality of a family member to her, which has been a rewarding part of her experience.

#### **Theme 5: Sexual Identity Development**

In addition to navigating disclosure, sexual identity development emerged as another significant theme in the research. For most participants, their parent’s disclosure offered their first experience with a homosexual individual, causing them to wrestle with the concept of homosexuality for the first time. Some participants also questioned their own sexuality as a result of their parent coming out.

**Sub-theme: First encounter with homosexuality.** For all but one of the participants (Grace), their parent coming out to them was their first encounter with homosexuality. Because of this introduction, it proved a significant experience for each of them, as each had to decide what they personally thought and believed about homosexuality. This initial encounter with the topic affected Erin and Diane most. Erin

said, "...I mean, I hadn't thought anything of homosexuality, like nothing. It was just this foreign subject to me because it wasn't personal." Similarly, Diane described feeling like her father's disclosure came in the "beginning stages of people coming out," and, as a result, she felt as though she were one of the first to experience someone coming out to them, which made her feel lonely and confused. While Grace's parent coming out was not her first experience with homosexuality, she still experienced confusion because the parental disclosure felt more personal. She said,

When you're in high school and you're so impressionable, and you're trying to figure out who you are and what you think, it was really not good timing. And it brought up a lot of questions and confusion, just probably about sexuality in general.

For all individuals, regardless of whether it was the first encounter or not, their parent's homosexuality disclosure caused distress as they had to begin the process of deciding what they thought and believed about homosexuality and their own sexual identity.

**Sub-theme: Questioning own sexuality.** Three participants questioned their own sexuality as a result of their parent coming out. This questioning mostly resulted from their belief that others viewed homosexuality as genetic. Erin said,

I've questioned myself with that, just because I've thought, does this mean I'm gay too? I've never had those feelings, and I've never worried about that, but it's made me question myself and being afraid that maybe some day I could develop those feelings or something.

For Hannah, her questioning came less because of her belief of homosexuality as genetic and more because of emotions she experienced after a break up.

I feel like the things that my mom is talking about, I sometimes feel about like women. Just this strong emotional connection that I feel I can't get with guys. So it made me almost like question my sexuality a little bit.

Grace did not question her own sexuality after her mom came out but did experience a lot of confusion about sexuality as a whole. Interestingly, the three participants whose first encounter with homosexuality came from their parent were the same three who questioned their own sexuality.

#### **Theme 6: Present View of Homosexuality**

For each participant, processing through their parent's homosexual identity shaped their present view of homosexuality in significant ways. This process included pursuing knowledge about homosexuality, having a widened perspective on homosexuality, thinking through what the Bible says about homosexuality, and becoming advocates.

**Sub-theme: Pursuing knowledge about homosexuality.** All participants pursued knowledge about homosexuality after their parent came out in order to develop a deeper understanding and a more informed opinion on homosexuality. Erin and Diane sought out information specifically through school assignments. Both described using research papers in classes as an opportunity to learn more about homosexuality. Diane read books on homosexuality given to her by her counselor. Additionally, for Hannah, Grace, and Erin, having conversations with others about homosexuality proved helpful in processing and forming opinions. For Erin, this pursuit included seeking out people who identified as homosexual to learn more about their experience.

**Sub-theme: Widened perspective on homosexuality.** Participants indicated having a widened perspective, usually resulting from the knowledge they had pursued about homosexuality. For Erin, this expanded perspective developed in the midst of writing a research paper on homosexuality. She said,

I have gained a wider perspective of it and I've challenged myself and when I wrote that paper my freshmen year, when I started my thesis was that homosexuality is a choice and I changed it very quickly after I did some research . . . to, it's caused by environmental factors. My final thesis was that it's environmental and biological.

Erin continued, saying she became more open-minded to other aspects of sexuality, such as transgender and bisexuality. Diane mentioned conversing with someone who disclosed her struggles with homosexuality, who helped Diane to realize the "line is blurry."

**Sub-theme: Biblical view.** As a result of their increased knowledge and widened perspective on homosexuality, Erin, Hannah, and Grace each approached homosexuality from their biblical view of God's love. All three viewed homosexuality as wrong but assumed the responsibility to love homosexual individuals and not condemn them.

Hannah expressed,

I still believe that God intended for us to be heterosexual, but I don't think that he's looking at people who are practicing homosexuality . . . and being like, wow what a sinner you are . . . in the end [homosexual relationships are] love, and God is love.

Similarly, Grace shared her opinion, as well as her frustration with how some Christians treat homosexuals.

And even though I still believe [what the Bible says about homosexuality], like I do believe that it's wrong, I still have felt like we can still love those people and make them feel safe and give them a space to talk about it, but I feel like sometimes the love is left out of it.

Both Hannah and Erin described not condemning people who identify as homosexual.

Erin said,

I refuse to take a stance on this and say that it's wrong or it's right because that's not my job and God has called me to love people and not to say what they're doing is right or wrong.

Diane also views homosexuality as biblically wrong but chosen to maintain what she describes as close-minded views on the subject. She said,

I was and am still to this day very judgmental towards homosexuality. Yeah, super judgmental, like shut it down the second it comes up. I think it's wrong. So I'm very close-minded towards the area of homosexuality and just because I believe the Bible says it's wrong, acting on homosexual feelings is wrong.

She also talked about her inability to reconcile her father's homosexuality with her faith:

I can't bring the two together. I can't reconcile them . . . I can't reconcile the two because to me, faith and homosexuality don't mix. And like if you're going to be a follower of the Lord, you are not going to act on those feelings. And that's why I can't forgive him, because those things can't reconcile.

Diane's view of homosexuality significantly affected her relationship with her father and had noteworthy impacts on her own mental health.

**Sub-theme: Advocacy.** Once participants had worked through their views of homosexuality and felt more open-minded towards it, they often became advocates for individuals who identified as homosexual. This advocacy proved most evident in Grace's and Erin's experiences, who both described their desire to welcome homosexual individuals into church communities. Advocacy played the largest role in Erin's experience, shaping her hopes for future career and ministry work:

I want to do work with reconciliation between the LGBT community and the church and families. And I don't think that means 'you're sinning, let's fix you.'

But . . . what does it look like to process this together in a loving and healthy way so that people don't feel alienated by the church, but loved by the church?

The hurt Erin and Grace saw in their parent's experience, particularly from the church, gave them the desire and passion to advocate for others.

### **Conclusion**

While each participant experienced unique situations as a result of her parent coming out, the similarities among the four remain significant. For all, the nature of family relationships, faith development, sexual identity development, the impact of the college environment, learning how and when to disclose, and their present view of homosexuality largely shaped their experiences and the way they processed those experiences.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

The current research sought to learn more about the phenomenon of Christian college students' parent's disclosing a homosexual identity by answering the following questions: (a) What is the experience of college students at faith-based institutions who have a parent disclose a homosexual identity? And (b) what effect does the faith of the individual and the college environment have on the experience? Seven themes emerged in the study: family relationships, faith development, sexual identity relationship, college environment, disclosure, and present view of homosexuality. To discover implications for practice, the discussion below examined each theme and previous research supporting it.

#### **Exploration of Themes and Previous Literature**

**Family relationships.** The first theme related to the effects on family relationships. According to Savin-Williams (2011), parents reacted in six potential ways to their child coming out: shock, denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. While Savin-Williams' research focused on parents, participants' reactions in the present research paralleled the parents' reactions. All participants expressed feelings of shock, anger, denial, and hurt after their parent came out to them. Savin-Williams also found parents of homosexual individuals began to grieve that individual after the disclosure. While several years had passed since the initial disclosure, the individuals in

the current study, particularly Erin and Diane, still felt in the midst of the grief process.

Erin explained,

I started to grieve my mom in a lot of ways, just the person I knew her to be, and I think I'm still in that stage, I'm still grieving who she is, and I haven't gotten to that acceptance yet, and it's been four years.

Additionally, parents of homosexual children often grieved their child's abandonment of familial values (Borhek, 1983; Savin-Williams, 2001). This data aligned with the current research, which found that participants felt most hurt by changes in their parent seemingly incongruent with values taught to the participant by the parent.

While only one participant's experience incorporated a parental affair, noting the relational effects on children of divorces caused by affairs could provide more context for why participants experienced closeness with the other parent and distance from their gay parent, in that one parent could potentially be "blamed." Nogales (2009) found children of infidelity experienced anger and resentment towards the unfaithful parent. However, unlike the present research, Nogales indicated children of infidelity experienced feelings of resentment towards their other, faithful parent, as the child became that parent's emotional caretaker. While the experiences of some participants did not align with the findings of Nogales' study, Diane's feelings toward her mother and having to protect her emotionally in the midst of her father's disclosure appeared consistent with Nogales' findings. The unique experience of a parent coming out renders it difficult to know why some participants became closer to their other parent.

**Faith development.** The development of faith emerged as the second theme in the research. The current study found participants underwent a process of spiritual

confusion, crisis, and, ultimately, growth. Pargament, Murray-Swank, Magyar, and Ano (2005) found spiritual struggles—defined as spiritual turmoil manifesting in negative feelings toward God, others, or self—often became spurred on by difficult life circumstances. Their findings supported the current research’s claim that participants’ parent’s disclosure caused the children’s spiritual crisis or confusion.

Additionally, Pargament et al. (2005) established that spiritual struggle often leads to spiritual growth. All participants indicated growth in their faith as a result of the experience. The Faith Development Theory by Parks (2000) states that, as young adults develop spiritually, they transition from trusting all the views and opinions of authorities to beginning to think and make choices and belief commitments for themselves, a process known as dependence (Evans et al., 2010). Further, young adults learn inner dependence, which involves connecting what they learn from the world around them to their own views and beliefs. Spiritual growth might have additionally taken place as participants felt forced to decide what they believe about homosexuality. As the current study found, supported by previous studies, significant faith development takes places after a parent comes out.

**Impact of college environment.** A third theme focused on the effects of the college environment on the experience of participants. Most importantly, participants felt the college environment gave them space from the issues going on home, which proved beneficial for in their healing process. The dual process of coping with grief, studied by Stroebe and Schut (1999), established that a necessary part of the grieving process is oscillating between confrontation of grief and distraction from grief. Based on Stroebe and Schut’s research, participants might have distracted themselves from their grief for

the first time as they entered the college environment and left their challenging parent and family relationships behind. This distraction seemed to allow participants space from the issue but also made their time focusing on their grief more meaningful and fruitful.

Research by Buldoc et al. (2007), which found that college students with divorced parents viewed the divorce as easier to handle once they no longer lived at home, also supported this finding.

Additionally, previous research found the physical space of a residence hall is not conducive with the grieving process, as individuals cannot find places for solitude (Clark, 2015; Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014). However, participants in the current research viewed the residence hall space as mostly positive, though perhaps because participants were out of their initial grief, as the disclosure had happened years prior to coming to college. Diane, who had recently experienced a new wave of grief in learning her father had chosen to live with his partner, did mention negative aspects of the space, particularly the perceived pressure always to appear fine so that others would not ask what troubled her. Overall, the college environment did play a large role in the experience of participants; professionals who might work with these students must remain aware of this element.

**Learning to disclose.** The fourth theme in the research arose in the process of learning about disclosure. Research on families who have a homosexual family member found they also go through their own coming-out-process as they disclose their family member's homosexual identity to others and learn which people are safe or unsafe to disclose to based on those who might discriminate against the homosexual family member (Borhek, 1983; Bishop & Allen, 2011). This data explains why the process of

disclosure proved so crucial to participants, as well as why participants felt frustrated with students, professors, and chapel speakers who appeared close-minded. Each had to learn the types of people she could trust and how she would share the information.

Similar to other studies, the current research asserted the importance of disclosure in traumatic life events. Disclosure proves beneficial for psychological and physical health, as well as overall functioning (Frattaroli, 2006), and those who disclose experience less psychological distress and more positive self-concept, personal growth, and self-acceptance (Hemenover, 2003). Similarly, Clark (2015) found that discussing grief helped Christian college students in their grieving process. Conversely, nondisclosure is associated with avoidant symptoms (Arata, 1998), so participants who chose not to disclose might have been in the denial stage of their grieving process, in which they avoided the issue or pretended it did not exist. Finally, nondisclosure proved an ineffective way to deal with psychological distress (Arata, 1998). This research provided context for Diane's experiences, in which her mother did not allow her to disclose and caused her to experience significant mental health consequences as a result.

Additionally, Bishop and Allen (2011) found that families might not disclose due to fear of judgment. Similarly, in the current research, participants felt afraid of disclosing due to fear of a negative view of their parent, themselves, or not wanting to make others uncomfortable. Finally, research by Clark (2015) discovered that grieving college students became what the researcher referred to as "Experienced Grievers" and used their experiences to support others experiencing grief. Similarly, participants used their experience to support others dealing with family issues or struggling with a homosexual family member. The results of this study proved consistent with previous

research, an indication of the importance of the disclosure process for Christian college students who have a parent come out as homosexual.

**Sexual identity development.** The fifth theme in the research emerged as the development of participant's sexual identity. The Model of Sexual Orientation Identity Formation developed by Cass (1979) includes six stages of individuals adopting a homosexual identity (Evans et al., 2010). In the prestage, individuals assume their own heterosexuality until they experience some kind of conflict that changes their perception. Additionally, Davies (2008) found daughters with lesbian mothers questioned their own sexuality as a result of their mother coming out. These previous findings might provide clarity as to why the first encounter with homosexuality caused female students to question their own sexuality. While all participants self-identified as heterosexual, their confusion and questioning that occurred as a result of their parent's disclosure remains a noteworthy aspect of their experience.

**Present view of homosexuality.** The final theme of the research was the participants' present view of homosexuality. Research conducted by Bishop and Allen (2011) found that family members of homosexual individuals intentionally read literature and gained knowledge about homosexuality in order to understand their gay family member better while in the ambivalence stage of accepting a family member's homosexual identity, a stage characterized by the attempt to integrate the homosexual family member into their lives and view the situation more positively. This research provided insight into the pursuit of knowledge experienced by participants in the current study, which, in turn, led to a widened perspective on homosexuality in most cases, excluding Diane. Diane's present view of homosexuality and inability to reconcile her

faith with her father's identity proves important, despite being the only participant in the current study to feel as she did. Most likely, she represented a number of Christian college students who have trouble reconciling their parent's homosexual identity with what they believe and experience distress as a result.

Further, research by Kircher and Ahlijah (2011) revealed that religion often has a positive impact on the parents of homosexual children, as their faith allowed them to "accept their LGBT children by teaching them the importance of love, faith, and family" (p. 12). This finding might explain why certain participants—particularly Erin, Hannah and Grace—adopted a biblical view of homosexuality that focused primarily on their understanding of God's love. Finally, Kircher and Ahlijah found that family members of homosexual individuals tend to take on a mindset of advocacy within the church; several participants remained in their churches as spokespeople for the LGBT community or strongly believed that churches need to become more inclusive of homosexual individuals. Moreover, another study found that a pastor with a homosexual son eventually created ministries within his church that focused on reaching out to gays and lesbians in the community (Phillips & Ancis, 2008). The findings of this research, as well as data from previous studies, evidenced a change in perception of homosexuality, which resultantly became a desire to care well for homosexual family members.

### **Limitations of Research**

The first limitation of the research came with the number of participants. The researcher hoped to secure at least eight participants but could only find four. Because of this limitation, the findings, though important, could not be generalized to the experience of all college students at faith-based institutions who experienced a parent come out. As a

second limitation, all participants were female, leaving the experience of male students unaccounted for in the present research. Additionally, the researcher sought to find the experience of college students whose parent came out to them *while* the students were in college; however, all the participants' parents came out while their children were in high school, adding a further limitation. Finally, as with any study, while the researcher tried to remain as unbiased as possible, researcher bias may still have affected the findings of the research, as the researcher had personal experience with a homosexual parent.

### **Implications for Practice**

The finding with the largest implication for higher education professionals related to initial disclosure and continued processing of the parent's homosexuality. Participants who did not share or give themselves space to process their experience dealt with weighty mental health repercussions. The research indicates that, to support these students, higher education professionals to become safe individuals who help such students process their experience. Students deemed a person as safe who showed sensitivity when talking about homosexuality, who expressed interest in the student's lives, and who communicated support and empathy. Students deemed a safe response as one that encouraged future processing, limited judgment, involved follow-up, and maintained confidentiality. Professionals can feel the freedom to ask students about the experience after the initial disclosure and ask what participants described as "good questions" that help the students move forward in processing the event.

The research has important programmatic implications as well, specifically in the area of training. The first people with whom one participant shared her experience were the student leaders in her residence hall. Research indicates that, in the case of traumatic

life events, the reaction of the person first disclosed to affects whether or not the individual will choose to disclose again (Arata, 1998). Because individuals experiencing a homosexual parent coming out might choose to disclose to their student leaders, it is important to train these students in responding well to such a disclosure. Training should include responding to disclosure with care and empathy, focusing on the individual and the person's well-being rather than the parent's homosexuality.

Similarly, faculty members could benefit from training in order to know how best to care for students who experience these issues and how to remain sensitive to the various emotional and personal challenges of the students they encounter. This training could focus on how to have conversations and share their opinions on hard and potentially polarizing topics, such as homosexuality, in ways that leave space for different viewpoints and experiences. Faculty members should understand that students on their campus might be sensitive towards homosexuality because of a gay parent or family member, or because they identify as homosexual. In order to remain inclusive to this topic and other family or personal struggles, faculty members can learn how to voice their opinion while leaving space for other opinions. The faculty can accomplish this delicate approach by asking questions and willingly listening to viewpoints different from their own. A final programmatic implication outside of training comes with the need for higher education professionals to have an awareness of how campus events, particularly those that emphasize family—such as family weekends or chapels that focus on family—might affect students in this situation. Checking in with students during these events could help them feel supported and cared for.

Further implications for professionals deal primarily with classes and professors. Participants often viewed aspects of these contexts and individuals as unsupportive or unhelpful. Thus, professors and teaching faculty may learn from the present findings. Participants considered discussions on homosexuality unhelpful when professors started the conversations by sharing their biases and opinions. Instead, professors could create an open dialogue by either waiting to share their own views or not sharing them at all. Additionally, professors could guide discussions and create safer environments by asking for other opinions when students share strong, one-sided views. Professors could frame these conversations well so that students with similar experiences do not feel unsafe or unheard in classroom spaces, regardless of their experience and chosen perspective.

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### **Future Research**

The findings and implications of the present research indicated a need to understand better the experience of Christian college students who have a parent disclose a homosexual identity. The current study examined the experiences of four female individuals at a small, faith-based, liberal arts college in the Midwest. Future research could focus on male students and how, if at all, their experience differs from those of female students.

Additionally, focusing on Christian college students whose parents' came out while the students were in the college setting would provide greater understanding of this phenomenon. Future research could also focus on disclosure and what keeps students from disclosing this experience. Finally, it would be beneficial to learn about the experience of non-Christian college students with similar journeys to possibly provide a helpful point of comparison.

**Conclusion**

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While the experience of a parent disclosing a homosexual identity does not prove common, those who experience such a reality need distinctive support. The present study explored the phenomenon of parents disclosing homosexuality to Christian college students in order to understand the commonalities in the experience, as well as how professionals can best support these particular students. Among other findings, the study found that the relationship with the gay parent becomes negatively affected, with the disclosure resulting in a distant relationship between the student and their parent. It also found the importance of the students disclosing the experience and the negative consequences of not doing so, as well as how students define a “safe” person to share with. In the end, most participants developed a widened perspective on homosexuality. Overall, the present research, although tentative because of small sample size, indicated that a parent coming out has meaningful effects, both negative and positive, on Christian college students. Understanding these effects allows both students and professionals to care and support the students experiencing this phenomenon, in order to process their feelings and to work toward reconciliation between themselves and their parent.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Protocol Questions**

- 1) Tell me what happened when your parent came out.
  - a. When did it happen?
  - b. Did your parents divorce?
  - c. How was your family impacted? How were your relationships with individual family members impacted?
  - d. Did you suspect your parent was homosexual prior to the disclosure?
- 2) What was your reaction?
  - a. Did it affect you personally/emotionally? What did you feel?
  - b. Did it affect you academically? How?
  - c. Did it affect your relationships? How?
  - d. Did it affect your view of sexuality or your own sexuality?
  - e. How did it affect your relationship with the parent that came out? What about with the other parent?
  - f. What is your relationship with both parents like now?
- 3) Who did you tell about your parent?
  - a. Did you go to counseling?
  - b. What caused you to tell or not tell someone?
  - c. Did it feel safe to tell others on campus about the situation?

- d. Did you feel supported? By whom? Peers or mentors?
- 4) How did the campus environment affect the experience?
- a. What situations/environments/conversations, if any, made you feel uncomfortable or unsupported on your college campus?
  - b. Particularly, what effects did the faith-based nature of the institution have on your experience?
  - c. Were you in the residence hall? How did being in the hall affect your experience?
- 5) In what ways did your parent's homosexual identity disclosure affect your faith?
- a. In what ways did your faith affect your parent's disclosure?
  - b. Did it change your faith or view of God in any way?
  - c. What was your process of reconciling your faith with your parents' homosexual identity?
- 6) Had anyone else come out to you prior to your parent's homosexual disclosure?
- a. If so, how did you respond?
- 7) Has anyone come out to you since your parent's disclosure?
- a. If so, how did you respond?

## **Appendix B**

### **Taylor University Informed Consent**

#### **When a Parent Comes Out: The Experience of Christian College Students Who Have a Parent Come Out as Homosexual**

You are invited to participate in a research study of the experiences of Christian college students who have a parent disclose a homosexual identity. You were selected as a possible subject because either your hall director or counselor identified you as someone who has experienced this. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

The study is being conducted by Celeste Ryan of Taylor University as part of the Master of Arts in Higher Education program.

#### **STUDY PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study is to find themes within the experience of college students who have a parent come out, and what effect faith and the college environment have on that experience, in order to help peers and professionals support these students.

#### **NUMBER OF PEOPLE TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

If you agree to participate, you will be one of eight participants in this research.

#### **DURATION**

The expected duration of your participation is approximately 60 minutes.

#### **PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY:**

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked a series of 6 to 8 questions with follow-up prompts. Your interview will be transcribed by a transcriber outside of the university and pseudonyms will replace your name in order to maintain your confidentiality. The transcribed interviews will be used to find similarities within the experiences of all participants.

#### **RISKS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

While in the study, the anticipated risks include emotional turmoil caused recalling distressing memories or events, and the potential for an invasion of privacy. There also may be side effects that we cannot predict.

In order to minimize the risks, the researcher will be sensitive to and aware of your emotional state at all times, and information regarding counseling services will be provided, if desired.

#### BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:

The potential benefits of participation are emotional healing caused by processing through your experience, as well as providing information that could, in the future, help others understand this unique experience and how to support individuals going through it.

#### VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Involvement in this research is voluntary. You may choose to withdraw from the research at any time during or after the interview. If you choose to withdraw after the interview, your interview recording will be destroyed to maintain confidentiality, and any information provided from your experience will not be used in the final research presentation.

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

All information will be kept confidential to standard guidelines of Taylor University and FERPA, and no names will be released in research findings. All names will be changed within the final research and in the presentation of the research.

Organizations that may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis include groups such as the study investigator and his/her research associates, the Taylor University Institutional Review Board or its designees, the study sponsor, Carol Sisson, and (as allowed by law) state or federal agencies, specifically the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) etc., who may need to access your research records.

#### COSTS

While there are no anticipated costs for participating in this study, any and all costs will be the responsibility of the participants.

#### PAYMENT

You will not receive payment for taking part in this study.

#### CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

If you have any questions at any time concerning this research, contact Celeste Harris (574)527-4218 or [celeste\\_harris@taylor.edu](mailto:celeste_harris@taylor.edu) or the research supervisor, Carol Sisson (765)998-4572 or [crsisson@taylor.edu](mailto:crsisson@taylor.edu)

This proposal has been reviewed and approved by Taylor University's IRB, which is a committee whose task it is to make sure that research participants are protected from harm. Questions regarding institutional research, including this research project, can be directed to Ms. Sue Gavin, Chair IRB, 765-998-4315 or [ssgavin@taylor.edu](mailto:ssgavin@taylor.edu).

**VOLUNTARY NATURE OF STUDY**

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with the researcher or the university.

**SUBJECT'S CONSENT**

You may ask questions concerning the research before signing the following consent form.

I HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO READ THIS CONSENT FORM, ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROJECT AND AM PREPARED TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROJECT.

**Subject's Printed Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Subject's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

