

PREFACE

The family—that dear octopus from whose tentacles we never quite escape nor, in our inmost hearts, ever quite wish to.

—DOROTHY GLADYS SMITH

THROUGH MY EXPERIENCES AS A THERAPIST, A SCHOLAR, and, not least important, a family member, I continue to be in awe and humbled by the power and influence of the family. A family can be a safe haven from a difficult world, a loving place to raise children, a destructive source of emotional and physical violence, or some combination of all these. It seems, no matter what our families were like when we were growing up, they always remain a part of us, for better or worse. Whatever our experiences, invisible cords reach through time and space to forever connect us to our mothers, fathers, siblings, and children—and no matter how hard we try, if we try at all, we can never completely free ourselves from their influence.

However, the discovery that a son or daughter is gay or lesbian is like an earthquake whose tremors threaten to permanently weaken even the strongest family. A father fears his lesbian daughter will face discrimination in the workplace, preventing her from having a successful career. A mother panics that she did something wrong to make her son gay. Both mothers and fathers find themselves reeling as their long-held ideas about sexuality and relationships are upended. Furthermore, they agonize that their children will be unsafe as they launch them into a world where lesbian and gay youth are discriminated against, assaulted, even murdered. Gay children

worry they will lose the love of the most important people in their lives, their parents.

Parents matter. Ann Muller, a mother of a gay child who wrote a book with this title reminded us of this simple truth in 1987, but she didn't need to, especially those of us who were gay or lesbian and thinking of coming out to our fathers and mothers. Not long ago it was believed that lesbians and gays distanced from their families to avoid facing their disapproval and rejection, creating families of their own out of friendship networks (Kurdek and Schmitt 1987; Weston 1991). However, currently, more and more are coming out during adolescence and young adulthood—before they are old enough to find the community necessary to form these networks.

The good news is that accepting parents can buffer the effects of a harsh, stigmatizing world on a gay or lesbian young person (D'Augelli 2002). The not so good news is that despite recent signs of (slowly) growing societal acceptance, parents still struggle with their children's gay sexual orientation, and too many lesbian and gay youth are still ejected from their homes by parents who will not or cannot accept them (Wilber, Ryan, and Marksamer 2006). Thus it is no wonder that the biggest fear of many children who have yet to come out is that they will be rejected by their parents and lose the one resource that has the potential to offer safety in a harsh world—their families.

In addition to Muller (1987), several others have given us important, insightful glimpses into the family lives and relationships of lesbian and gay children. Everyone who is in the business of helping lesbian and gay young people and their families, or who lives in such a family, owes these researchers, clinicians, and parents an enormous debt of gratitude. However, these descriptions, studies, and models of coming out tend to be individually focused and rely almost exclusively on either the perception of the youth (Cass 1979; Savin-Williams 2001a; Troiden 1989) or parents (Borhek 1993; Griffin, Wirth, and Wirth 1997; Herdt and Koff 2000; Robinson, Walters, and Skeen 1989). What would parents and children from the same family say about the coming out experience? What do parents think helps their adjustment? What do children think is beneficial? How are parent and child impressions similar and different and why?

The traditional thinking about parental adjustment goes something like this: 1. parents get upset or angry when they learn their kid is gay, 2. their frightened, helpless children who are seeking love and acceptance are victims of their parents' disapproval, 3. parents get educated about homosexuality, 4. they feel better and their attitudes toward their children improve, 5. the

end. As a gay man and a family therapist, I have long suspected that this story was way too simple and far from complete. So I undertook this study of sixty-five gay and lesbian youth and their parents to see if I could get a fuller picture, one that included the perspectives of parents and children in the same family.

However, as I interviewed the young people and their parents, I found what I had long suspected in my clinical work, that there was a *family* adjustment process. Parental reaction and adjustment to the news that a child is gay or lesbian did not occur in isolation. The children's personal characteristics and the relationships they maintained with their families played a significant role in parental recovery. Furthermore, the interviews seemed to suggest that family adjustment occurred in stages or phases—revealing a process not fully encompassed by grief-recovery models suggested in the earlier literature (Mattison and McWhirter 1995; Robinson et al. 1982). These stages were not necessarily temporal but were instead typified by reciprocal parent-child interaction patterns unique to each phase of the family adjustment trajectory. These interaction patterns provided insight into family struggles and suggest guidelines that can assist therapists in working with these clients.

In addition, previous models of gay self-acceptance and coming out describe a mostly *individual* process during which a lesbian or gay male traverses a path from confusion and distress to eventual self-acceptance (Cass 1979; Coleman 1982; Troiden 1989). However, what the interviews in this book uncover is the potentially powerful role of the family in gay and lesbian self-acceptance, which further underscores the importance of considering the family in working with lesbian and gay youth.

This book is not meant to contradict or replace the findings of the excellent research, clinical guides, and articles already available, some already mentioned and others cited in the body of this book. Instead, I hope readers integrate the information herein with that of my fellow colleagues, adding their own clinical wisdom to the mix so as to provide the most sensitive and effective treatment possible.

In the spirit of grounded theory, this work was inductive in nature. The themes and patterns that emerged from the interviews were compared, contrasted, and, when relevant, integrated with existing literature. However, in putting together my ideas, if the findings could be considered bricks, clinical wisdom was the mortar. No one study answers all the questions in a particular area and most raise additional questions. Thus I drew from my twenty-five years of practice experience to make cohesive sense of the results, fill holes in

the data with tentative explanations as well as develop practice suggestions. My theory and clinical implications are not evidence-based where they have not been empirically tested with this population. I hope the reader keeps in mind that my findings are best considered hypotheses, no matter how strongly asserted. Nevertheless, the clinical recommendations in this book are based on research findings and, if combined with the practitioner's clinical wisdom and common sense, should prove useful.

Furthermore, it is important to understand that most of the parents in these families were at least somewhat adjusted by the time I interviewed them. This does not mean they did not go through difficult times—as you will see, many did. But, for the most part, these tough times were behind them. With few exceptions, I did not attract families with parents who did not recover, at least somewhat, from the news that a daughter or son was gay or who persistently rejected their children. My general experience as a researcher and clinician has taught me that it is difficult to get people who are unhappy or in the middle of a crisis to talk to a research interviewer about their experiences—those are the folks who come to see us as therapists. So these findings are not necessarily representative of the entire population of gay and lesbian families (whatever that is), but more likely indicative of the adjustment that is possible—and what therapists can help families strive for.

“Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass; it's about learning to dance in the rain” (anonymous). The simple yet profound wisdom reflected in this quote is made evident in the stories of these families. I was moved and humbled by the way parents and children held onto one another, growing closer despite their fears and shattered expectations. Once again, as in my previous work, I was awestruck by the depth and persistence of family connections, which led me to reflect on the mysterious ties that bind families together, including those that bind me to my own.

I learned a lot from these families—I hope you will as well.