Siblings and the Coming-Out Process: A Comparative Case Study

Stephanie Haxhe, Alison Cerezo, Jeannette Bergfeld & Joseph C. Walloch

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

Siblings and the Coming-Out Process: A Comparative Case Study

Stephanie Haxhe, PhD, Alison Cerezo, PhD, Jeannette Bergfeld, PsyD, and Joseph C. Walloch, PsyD

Psychological and Speech Therapy Consultation Center, University of Liège, Liège, Belgium; Department of Counseling, San Francisco State University, San Francisco, California, USA; Clinical Psychology PsyD Program, Alliant International University, San Francisco, California, USA; Counseling Services, University of Nevada, Reno, Nevada, USA

ABSTRACT

Siblings play a key, supportive role in the lives of many lesbian and gay adults. Yet siblings are rarely considered in the literature regarding the coming-out process (D'Augelli et al., 1998; Hilton & Szymanski, 2011; LaSala, 2010; Savin-Williams & Dubé, 1998). To fill this gap in the research literature, we carried out a comparative case study in the country of Belgium between two sets of siblings—three Romani brothers with one sibling identifying as a gay male and three White sisters with one sibling identifying as a lesbian. These two cases were pulled from a larger qualitative study (Haxhe & D'Amore, 2014) of 102 native French-speaking Belgian participants. Findings of the present study revealed that siblings offered critical socio-emotional support in the coming out of their lesbian and gay sibling, particularly with disclosing to parents and with fostering self-acceptance.

Although the prevailing opinion among mental health professionals has been that it is psychologically healthy and important for the wellbeing of sexual minorities to come out to family, this notion has been called into question as the data suggest that coming out may result in unfavorable family contexts, such as the loss of social support from one's family of origin (Baam, Grossman, & Russell, 2015; Gorman-Murray, 2008; Page, 2015). In the next section we review the research literature concerning how cultural factors impact diverse responses from family members to the coming out of a lesbian daughter or gay son.

Gender and cultural factors in the coming-out process

Heatherington and Lavner (2008) carried out an extensive literature review to summarize factors associated with familial responses to the coming out of

a lesbian daughter or gay son. The authors found that gender was important; fathers were more likely to react negatively to their child coming out than mothers, especially with gay sons, and fathers were less likely than mothers to be informed of their child's lesbian or gay identity altogether (Ben-Ari, 1995; Merighi & Grimes, 2000). Brothers also tended to react more negatively toward a gay sibling than sisters (D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998). Outside of familial dynamics, Costa and Davies (2012) found that lesbians were more positively regarded than gay men and that women in general were more likely than men to have positive attitudes toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals.

Herek (2000, 2002, 2009) has written several articles on the "gender gap" when it comes to prejudice against LGBT people. In a more recent literature review, Herek and McLemore (2013) theorized that for men, prejudice against LGBT people is fueled largely by a need to live up to masculine gender norms, whereas for women, prejudice was fueled by traditionalist religious values concerning sexuality, gender, and family structure.

In addition to gender, race and ethnicity also play key roles in familial reactions to the coming out of a lesbian daughter or gay son. Consistent with the focus of the current study, we sought out to locate text on the relations between family dynamics and sexuality among Romani communities (common spelling also includes Romany and Roma), particularly LGBT family dynamics. Although no studies were identified, extant research highlights larger narratives concerning family and gender expectations that likely impact community perceptions and reactions to Romani LGBT individuals. Casey (2014) described the important role of gender within Romani life, especially as it relates to domestic responsibilities that encompass childrearing. According to Casey's study, romantic relationships within Romani culture were overwhelming heterosexual (e.g., male and female) and came with heteronormative expectations rooted in Romani culture and traditions. Specifically, Romani men were typically responsible for the economic health of the family unit, while females maintained domestic and child care responsibilities. Furthermore, Bereczkei (1998) found that fertility decisions among a sample of Romani families in Hungary were closely tied the strength of one's kinship network, which included relatives' assistance with child care. The author also spoke to the ways in which cultural traditions were practiced via family building and maintenance. Borrowing from Bereczkei's study, it can be assumed that Romani youth are often raised with an expectation to fulfill similar heteronormative traditions as adults, thus making it challenging to uphold Romani traditions when involved in same-sex relationships.

Religious affiliation has also been found to impact attitudes toward sexual minorities (Sherkat, De Vries, & Creek, 2010). Among U.S. samples, negative attitudes toward LGBT people have been associated with conservative religious beliefs and attitudes (Ahrold & Meston, 2010; Sherkat et al., 2010). For

example, Baiocco et al. (2015) investigated a range of factors associated with parental reactions to their children coming out and found that while mothers and fathers did not have significant differences in their reactions, right-wing political conservatism and strong religious beliefs significantly predicted whether parents responded to their children's coming out in a positive or negative manner.

A brief review of the literature suggests that culture matters in familial responses to the coming out of a lesbian daughter or gay son. Researchers have set out to explore the specific role of gender (Ben-Ari, 1995; Merighi & Grimes, 2000), religion (Ahrold & Meston, 2010), and other cultural markers (Biaocco et al., 2015), but there remains a gap in the literature concerning the interactive influence of culture and family structure, as in the impact of race and ethnicity of the family, gender makeup of siblings, and how these factors work in unison and/or contrast to influence the family's response to a lesbian daughter or gay son. In the next section we review research on the specific role of siblings in the coming-out process.

Siblings and the coming-out process

In the general field of sibling studies, prominent researchers have highlighted the importance of sibling relationships, notably in the development of social and relational skills (Feinberg, Sakuma, Hostetler, & Mc Hale, 2013; Stormshak, Bellanti, & Bierman, 1996; Sulloway, 2010). For instance, sibling warmth is linked to peer acceptance and social competence in childhood (Stormshak et al., 1996), while conflictual and coercive sibling relationships have been associated with lower peer/social competence, lower school attachment, and risky behaviors (Feinberg et al., 2013).

Despite the importance of sibling relationships in individual's lives, they are rarely considered in the coming-out process. Hilton and Szymanski (2011) interviewed 14 heterosexual siblings after the coming out of their lesbian sister or gay brother and found that most of the participants reported feeling closer to their sibling after they came out, which resulted in increased communication and openness between siblings. In a similar examination, Harvey (2007) interviewed 10 sibling dyads of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual siblings and found that most of the sibling pairs adopted new communication strategies after the lesbian or gay sibling came out, including establishing consistent contact, intentional listening, and asking/answering questions. Similarly, Hilton and Szymanski (2011) found that among heterosexual adults, acceptance of a lesbian or gay sibling was associated with greater contact with LGBT individuals, greater support for LGBT civil rights, and lower religious attendance.

The birth order of siblings is another important factor in the coming-out process of lesbians and gays. LaSala (2010) theorized that older siblings face

unique challenges in coming out because parents often worry that the older sibling may influence the sexuality of younger siblings. Toomey and Richardson (2009) carried out a quantitative investigation of the impact of gender and birth order in the relational dynamics between LGBT and heterosexual siblings. In contrast with the authors' hypotheses, neither gender (of the heterosexual or lesbian or gay sibling) nor birth order was associated with sibling closeness or approval of the LGBT sibling's sexual behavior. Furthermore, LGBT participants were no more likely to be out to a heterosexual sister or brother and were equally likely to be out to a younger versus older siblings.

Present study

Since the sibling bond is an important factor in one's socio-emotional development—a bond that continues throughout the lifespan—the present study examines (a) how heterosexual siblings respond to the coming out of a lesbian sister or gay brother as well as (b) the role of heterosexual siblings in the larger family unit's response to the lesbian or gay sibling. As stated previously, the current study was part of a larger qualitative study with data collected via semistructured interviews with sibling units in the country of Belgium. It should also be noted that Belgium was the second country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage, thus making LGBT issues commonly considered in the larger public realm. As an extension of the Harvey (2007) study, we compare two cases from the original sample with the goal of understanding differences with respect to demographic characteristics. The two participants describe how their coming-out experiences were impacted by the intersectional influence of cultural identities, such as gender and gender identity, social class, race and ethnicity, and religion. Thus we would be remiss not to consider how heterosexual siblings' role within the coming-out process is an extension of the cultural identity and lived experiences shared within the family of origin.

Methods

Procedure

Participants were recruited from LGBT associations and networks connected to the University of Liège. We conducted phone screens with potential participants; if the participant met criteria (being lesbian, gay, or bisexual, having siblings, and having come out to them), heterosexual siblings were then invited to participate in the study. No monetary or academic incentives were offered for participation in the study.

Prior to beginning the interview process, participants were given a consent form describing the study. Permission was asked to record the interview, ensuring that data would be kept in a locked box, or on an encrypted hard-drive device. Permission was also asked to use data for research while ensuring confidentiality. Finally, participants were informed of their right to decide at any moment to revoke any authorization without justification, and to ask for the data to be destroyed.

The interviews were conducted in-person at a family member's home. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes and was conducted by the first author, a trained researcher in qualitative methods, who was accompanied by a student in his last year of master's degree study in psychology.

Participants

The data presented in this article were gathered from an original sample (Haxhe & D'Amore, 2014) composed of 102 native French-speaking Belgian participants: 44 LG (25 gays and 19 lesbians) and 58 heterosexual siblings, with a mean age of 26.34 years (SD = 5.07; Range = 18–40). With respect to familial characteristics, for the total sample, LG participants included 21 firstborn subjects, 21 later-born subjects, and a pair of twins. The sample was predominately White (93%) with the remaining families identifying as Black, Romani, and Moroccan. General results on the original sample have already been published (Haxhe & D'Amore, 2014); the authors explored the role of siblings within the family unit upon the coming out of LG adult offspring. The work presented in the current article constitutes a deeper level of analysis of two cases; the overarching goal is to draw comparisons in relation to the cultural differences between the two sibling groups.

The siblings groups selected for the present comparative case analysis were chosen based on several principal variables that included gender of siblings (see D'Augelli et al., 1998) and birth order (see LaSala, 2010). Furthermore, these two cases were also chosen in response to the differences they presented in the realm of gender (group of brothers versus group of sisters) and race/ethnicity, where Kevin was from a Romani family and Axelle was from a

Table 1. Sibling groups selected for comparison.

	Case 1: Kevin, Marvin, and Frans	Case 2: Axelle, Laurence, and Marie
Gender of lesbian/gay sibling	Male (Gay)	Female (Lesbian)
Age of L/G sibling	22	24
Birth order of L/G sibling	First	First
Education level of L/G sibling	Master's degree	Master's degree
Number of heterosexual siblings	3	3
Age of siblings interviewed	21 and 19	22 and 18
Familial socio class status	Working class; low income	Upper middle class

Note. Only the heterosexual siblings who were interviewed were included in this table. Both sibling groups have a younger sibling (under age 18 years of age) who was not available to be interviewed.

White family (Table 1). Few empirical studies on LG communities include Romani narratives; our overarching goal was to add an important, deeper level of analysis of a Romani sibling group—an underrepresented community in the research literature.

Data collection

Interviews

The semistructured interview protocol conducted in the main study (Haxhe & D'Amore, 2014) was composed of 10 questions intended to encourage in-depth narratives on the following themes: steps of coming out, LG members' and siblings' experience of coming out, role of siblings in the coming-out process, impact of coming out on sibling relationships, and comparison between coming out to parents and coming out to siblings. These themes were selected to verify and to expand on the existing scientific literature concerning the role of siblings in LG coming out.

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by advanced students in a master's degree program in psychology at the university where the study was conducted. When transcriptions were complete, identifying information was removed from each interview to protect participants' confidentiality. The first author reviewed the integrity of transcriptions; inconsistencies between audiotape/videotape recordings and transcriptions were not found. All transcripts were in French.

The grounded theory method was used to analyze the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Our team of 10 students and two faculty members analyzed interview transcripts for the larger data set to identify the presence of themes that recurred in discourse across their assigned interviews. Following the steps of the grounded theory method (Heath & Cowley, 2004), we conducted open coding line by line to devise conceptual categories. Next, we carried out axial coding by reducing and clustering the categories. The next step was selective coding where the categories were detailed and integrated, and the final core set of themes was determined. Progressively, via regular, data-driven team meetings, a deep level of analysis was reached, which resulted in a final set of themes as well as a strong understanding of the similarities and differences between the two cases (as presented in this article).

Results

In the next sections, we review each of the two cases. The following major, overarching themes were identified for each case: (a) heterosexual siblings'

reactions to the coming out of the LG sibling, and (b) impact of the coming-out process on the sibling relationship. We also present a summary following each case that highlights the main findings of each case presented.

Case 1: Kevin, Marvin, and Frans

Kevin is 22 years old and completing a master's degree in human resources management. He is the eldest of four siblings: Marvin, an unemployed 21-year-old, and Frans, a 19-year-old construction worker. His parents separated 17 years ago, and his mother has a new partner with whom she has a 15-year-old daughter, Cassy. The stepsister was not interviewed due to scheduling conflicts. After an attempt to reschedule, Kevin recommended we forego her involvement given their age gap and that she was not much involved in his coming-out process. Kevin's family reside in a small Romani community in a rural village, a 1-hour drive from Liege, where Kevin has been residing for the past several years.

Kevin came out as a gay man 3 years ago. He came out to his mother first, who he described as both supportive and sad, but accompanied Kevin to his father's house to make the announcement to Kevin's father and brothers. His father's reaction was violent; he hit Kevin and broke his tooth. However, his two brothers, Marvin and Frans, intervened to stop Kevi's father from engaging in further physical harm. After this coming-out experience, Kevin's father tried to accept his son, but the first time Kevin brought his boyfriend to the home, his father told him, " No... I don't like it, it's not normal." Thus Kevin chose not to visit his father after that incident. Kevin occasionally contacts his father and asks his brothers to say hello to his father for him.

During the interview, Kevin and his siblings spoke about their father's reaction to Kevin's coming out.

Kevin: He became nuts; he didn't understand.
Frans: We stopped him (speaking to father's reaction, which involved physical violence). It's because in our family we never knew that before.
Kevin: Plus the fact that we are Gypsy and in that culture homosexuality doesn't really exist. We don't even talk about it, like we don't talk about cops. (laughs)

Kevin and his brothers demonstrate how culture impacted Kevin family's response to him coming out as gay. As described by the participants, their enclave of Romani culture maintains strong traditional gender role expectations of men and women, which are strongly tied to heterosexuality and the ability of men and women to procreate (Gelbart, 2012; Tesăr, 2012). Kevin's assertion that homosexuality "doesn't really exist" in Romani culture and his

siblings' concern that he would not have children demonstrate how Kevin and his family have been impacted by Romani cultural expectations.

Siblings' reactions to Kevin coming out as a gay male

The following segment of the interview reveals the importance of family and, specifically, the theme of belongingness. We chose to showcase this segment of the interview because it provided an example of how cultural heritage impacted a family's reactions to a family member's coming out when that member was a son and brother in the family. Participants describe their reactions to their brother's coming out as a gay male:

> Marvin: It was incomprehensible to me…
>
> Frans: Personally, I wasn't shocked but it was weird. In fact, I didn't really realize and I thought, "Maybe he's telling us that to get some attention."
>
> Marvin: It's more the fact that we will never have some nieces or nephews… It's more things like that.
>
> Kevin: But I'm planning to have children!
>
> Frans: They won't be from our family…
>
> Marvin's girlfriend (interfering in the interview): If you adopt them, they won't be "thoroughbred."
>
> Kevin: But they could be my children! I just have to find a surrogate mother or a co-parental mother.

The question of belonging, of "who is in and who is out of the family," is important for Kevin's siblings. The word used by Marvin's girlfriend is significant—*thoroughbred*, evoking characteristics related to blood relationship. The use of the word *thoroughbred* is especially important given that Kevin and his family is ethnically Romani, an ethnic group that has a long history of social and political oppression in Europe (Brearley, 2001). Thus, to Kevin's family, the biggest challenge with his sexual orientation as a gay male is the risk that he will not father children who will be ethnically Romani. In the next passage, the siblings describe their stepsister's reaction to Kevin's sexual orientation and the role of gender in sibling acceptance of sexual orientation.

> Kevin: She was just astonished but she said she was OK if I was happy.
>
> Frans: It is less shocking for girls. For a girl, it is not shocking to see two boys together as it is not shocking for a boy to see two girls together.
>
> Kevin: Yes, all my siblings are (accepting). There is only him (pointing Marvin) who doesn't understand everything but…(laughs).
>
> Marvin: I don't have the choice; I won't lose a brother for that reason.
>
> Frans: Yes, when you think about it, you can tell yourself that if he is happy and healthy, the rest is secondary.

This dialogue is consistent with findings that women tend to be more accepting than men when someone comes out to them (Ben-Ari, 1995; D'Augelli et al., 1998). Kevin's brothers initially had a difficult time accepting his sexuality. As discussed in the interview, Frans and Marvin had no gay friends and were hesitant to tell their friends about Kevin's sexuality. They disclosed how there were relieved that Kevin lived approximately 70 miles away from their village so that they did not have to face their community's response to their gay brother. The residential distance gave them a buffer from having to experience any negative outcomes with respect to Kevin's gay identity, particularly with their social standing in their close-knit Romani community.

The brothers stated that although they did not play a proactive role in their brother's coming-out process, they provided support to him by stopping the physical abuse of their father directed at Kevin upon his coming out as a gay male. It is important to note that many Romani families endorse deference to the elders, particularly the male and/or men of the household (Tesăr, 2012). Thus the brothers' commitment to continue positive ties with Kevin, in addition to intervening when their father engaged in physical abuse toward him, are important markers of the strong familial ties between the three brothers.

In another section of the interview, we asked each of the siblings to name three words or descriptors that captured their feelings about Kevin's coming-out experience. Frans, the 19-year-old brother, stated, "Astonishing, a little weird and funny at the beginning, then you get used to it." Marvin, the 21-year-old brother stated, "Incomprehensible, special, and choking." Finally, Kevin, the gay sibling, stated "Hard, relieving, and frightening." Although the words shared among the brothers illuminate differing and conflicting feelings toward Kevin's coming out, they also showcase a steadfast commitment to maintaining positive familial bonds.

Impact of the coming-out process on the sibling relationships

The final section of the interview prompted participants to describe the impact of the gay sibling's coming-out experience on the current relationship between the gay sibling and his heterosexual siblings.

Marvin: As he lives 70 miles from here, there is some distance so we are glad to see him when he comes to visit.

Frans: Yes, if Kevin had stayed in the same village, we would have been with him all the time and it would have been weird.

Marvin: I think his homosexuality would have been present in each argument, even for no reason... In case of a disagreement we would have talk about that... to shock a little bit....

Although many siblings in the original study indicated that the coming-out experience improved their relationship (Haxhe & D'Amore, 2014), in this instance the siblings indicated that Kevin's physical distance from them had more of a positive impact on their relationship than Kevin's actual coming out. As reported by the heterosexual siblings, the physical distance was important in that it protected the family from having to respond to inquiries about Kevin's sexual orientation, thus allowing the family to reduce honorary stigma and instead maintain their social position within their Romani community. As described by Goffman (1963) and cited by LaSala (2010), honorary stigma involves stigma that is spread to individuals, such as family members, who are related to a stigmatized individual. Thus the physical distance allowed the brothers to keep a satisfying relationship, enjoying times with Kevin when he visits, as they stated that they might have argued all the time if Kevin has stayed in the village.

Case summary

Kevin's coming-out story is consistent with general themes in the research literature. As mentioned in several previous studies (Ben-Ari, 1995; D'Augelli et al., 1998), the gender of the LG person, as well as the gender of their siblings, plays a role in family acceptance of a LG family member. Kevin's case is consistent with previous research that shows how male family members tend to be less accepting than female family members, as well as a common experience for gay men to not be accepted by their family for reasons connected to masculinity and continuing the family line (Costa & Davies, 2012; Merighi & Grimes, 2000).

Sibling's birth order also played a role in Kevin's coming-out experience. Many gays and lesbians are afraid of emotionally harming their younger brothers and sisters—the eldest sibling often has a perceived duty as a role model in the family, notably at the request of parents. LaSala (2010) asserted that parents also fear that their oldest son or daughter's sexual identity will influence the sexuality of their younger siblings. Consequently, elders perceive this fear of contagion and are more likely to come out to a parent, asking permission to tell their younger sibling. Toomey and Richardon (2009) found that LGBT participants were most likely to come out to their mother first. Kevin followed this pattern, as he came out to his mother before coming out to his siblings, and relied on her help to buffer the potential for negative reactions from his other family members.

The culture of the family is another salient factor. The present case illustrates how Kevin's brothers have grown up in a heteronormative environment with traditional partnering between males and females. Tesăr (2012) described the process for girls and boys in Romani culture to become Rom (male) and Romni (female). Traditionally, Romani families arrange their marriages when girls and boys reach puberty, and

their manhood or womanhood is affirmed through sexual intercourse and procreation. Thus it was difficult for Kevin's siblings to comprehend how Kevin would be able to marry and have children, which is a central part of their culture. The reaction of Kevin's family matches with McVeigh and Diaz's (2009) findings that individuals from communities with more traditional gender roles and family values tend to have more negative views on homosexuality.

Case 2: Axelle, Laurence, and Marie

Axelle was a 24-year-old college student completing an undergraduate degree in paramedical studies. She was the eldest of four sisters; Laurence, 22 years old, who studied aesthetics at the time of data collection, and Marie, an 18-year-old who also studied aesthetics at the time of data collection. Their younger sister Viviane, 16 years old, was abroad at the time of the interview. Their parents live in a small town in the countryside where residents are typically Belgian, French-speaking, White, and upper middle class—as described by the participants. When Axelle started university, her parents bought an apartment for her and her sisters in the city closer to the university (25 miles from their home). Axelle's parents were raised Catholic but are not religious themselves, and they did not raise their children with a focus on religion in the home.

Axelle was in her first same-sex relationship with Regine, a 35-year-old woman with whom she had been involved with for one and a half years at the time of the interview. Axelle was living with her sister Laurence when she met Regine, making Laurence the first person in the family to learn of Axelle's sexual orientation; Marie was the second person in the family to be informed of her sister's sexual orientation.

Since Regine was frequently at the siblings' apartment, Laurence became frustrated and told her parents that a "friend" was staying there. Axelle called her mother to inform her about having a girlfriend. Despite her mother initially reacting supportively over the phone, this support waned within a few days. Her parents were angry about Axelle's romantic involvement with a woman and requested that she begin therapy to be "cured." Axelle described her parents' reaction as racist and homophobic; her mother compared Axelle's relationship with a woman to one of her daughters dating a male of African descent, stating that such a practice would mean that she did not "raise them right."

Although initially challenging for the family, the relationship between Axelle and her parents improved over the year following her coming out. Axelle reported that her mother would sometimes inquire about Regine and that her father had become emotionally closer as a means to express his unconditional support for her.

Siblings' reactions to Axelle's coming out as a lesbian

According to Axelle, each of her sisters responded to her coming out as a lesbian in a supportive manner. Axelle first told Laurence, who replied that she did not care about her sister's sexual orientation. However, coming out to Marie was more emotional for Axelle. She described telling her sister, "I know I'm going to disappoint you but I have something to tell you." Marie immediately replied: "If you feel good this way I don't care, you are still my sister." Viviane, the youngest sibling, reacted very positively. Axelle recalled feeling that the support she received from her sisters greatly outweighed any negative reactions from her parents.

Axelle: It was really difficult to tell my parents because… I was afraid that they would kick me out… I was still studying and I was afraid to [mess] it all up. But people around me were supportive and my sisters had told me "If mum and dad kick you out of the home, we will always still want to see you."

Marie: Yes, we had told her that we would back her up.

Axelle: Yeah. I think that… if they had not been supportive, I would have thought a lot more because… I would not only have lost my parents, I would have lost all my family. So I think I would have been able to go back to a man if nobody had accepted it. If my sisters had not accepted, I would have been unable to live without them. I could live without my parents but I couldn't live without my sisters, especially these ones (pointing toward Laurence and Marie). I have less connection with the youngest as I've been at university for several years and barely see her.

The passage above demonstrates the acceptance and support Axelle received from her sisters. In fact, she described their support as holding the power to buffer any rejection from her parents by knowing that she would not lose her family even if her parents no longer wanted to maintain a relationship with her. As described by Axelle, her sisters also encouraged their parents to be more supportive of Axelle, as evidenced by verbally declaring their support for her as well as initiating conversations about sexuality to expand their parents' knowledge and understanding.

Impact of the coming-out process on sibling relationships

In the final section of the interview, the sisters discussed how Axelle's coming-out process had impacted their ongoing sibling relationship. Axelle made note of how she assumed that her sisters did not take her relationship with Regine seriously because she was involved with a woman. Although Axelle's sisters provided her with critical emotional support, the dynamics between the sisters changed when Axelle began a same-sex relationship. The sisters described the strain in their relationship since Axelle came out as a lesbian.

Laurence: Disappointed, no more sharing. What was difficult was the social regard, but also that she was abandoning me, letting me down and… I don't know.

Marie: For me, it was a combination of feelings. I was excited to see Regine, I was happy for my sister but… at the same time, I was afraid because I already thought of my parents' reaction.

As demonstrated in the passage above, the relationship between Axelle and her sisters, upon Axelle's coming out as a lesbian, had shifted in a variety of ways. Axelle's coming out highlighted the close bond and unconditional support offered to her by her sisters. However, it also appeared that the closeness the sisters shared changed once they became suspicions about whether Axelle's relationship with Regine was emotionally healthy—not having to do with Axelle being in a same-sex relationship.

Laurence: My opinion is that you have changed since you have been with Regine. She controls you; you are her puppy and you don't smile anymore. When I see you, you always pull a long face.

Marie: You always tell us things that go wrong with her.

Laurence: The only conversation topic is Regine, Regine, Regine… We don't share anything with you now.

Marie: I like Regine as a woman but not as the girlfriend of my sister. To be honest, you are her Cinderella.

Axelle: And her bank! (laughs)

Marie: And her bank, yes. Seriously, you're not that kind of girl. You are more sociable; you enjoy life.

Laurence: She doesn't go out anymore.

Marie: Correct. The other day I wanted to go see a movie with her. She asked me to invite Regine too, but I just wanted to share a moment with my sister! It is like she isn't free anymore.

The passage above showcases the challenges faced by the sisters in supporting the coming-out process of Axelle. Although the sisters made it clear that they shared unconditional love and support of their sister, the closeness of their bond was impacted when Axelle began a relationship with a woman of whom they did not approve.

Case summary

Axelle came out to her sisters prior to coming out to her parents. The sisters' acceptance and support helped Axelle to come out to her parents; she was able to secure sibling support that gave her the confidence to approach her parents, knowing there was potential for rejection. Previous literature suggests that LGBT people may first come out to their siblings as a way to "test the water" of the family's reaction before coming out to parents (Beaty, 1999; Savin-Williams & Dubé, 1998; Toomey & Richardon, 2009). Laurence and Marie helped Axelle in her coming-out process in several ways, including promoting Axelle's self-acceptance as well as playing an important role in their parents' process by declaring their support

of Axelle and assuaging their parents' fears about Axelle's ability to live a happy, healthy life as a lesbian.

Although the sisters provided unconditional support to Axelle, her sister Laurence described her experience of Axelle's coming out as lesbian as, "Disappointed, no more sharing" and also described feeling abandoned by Axelle. Laurence and Axelle shared an apartment and vehicle when Axelle and Regine became romantically involved in a monogamous relationship. It appeared that birth order allowed for the emotional closeness and facilitative support to grow between Axelle and Laurence, but that with Regine now in the picture, Axelle had begun to rely on her girlfriend for support previously provided by her sister, Laurence. With that said, Laurence showcased a high degree of comfort with expressing her concerns about Axelle's romantic relationship to Axelle, thus showcasing the maintained closeness and support between the sisters.

Finally, Axelle's family culture was White and upper middle class, meaning that she and her sisters were raised in the dominant culture in Belgium. As described by Laurence, their parents were concerned about the potential loss of their social position within the community. Although the family—and the sisters in particular—remained supportive of Axelle after she came out as a lesbian, the family's cultural ties to the community made it difficult for them to affirm Axelle's sexual identity. Nevertheless, consistent with previous research (Ducommun-Nagy, 2006), the sense of loyalty toward the family of origin was powerful and outweighed any anxieties they believed would have come from their community upon learning of Axelle's sexual orientation.

Discussion

The purpose of this article was to illuminate the importance of sibling support in one's coming-out process, particularly the importance of sibling support when parents are not immediately supportive of adult gay and lesbian offspring. This article was unique in that it provided a comparison between a Romani family of brothers—a community that is severely underrepresented in the research literature—and a White family of sisters, all in the country of Belgium. Thus the comparisons we were able to draw from these two cases speak to the roles of gender, race and ethnicity, and social class in familial reactions to an adult offspring's coming out as lesbian or gay. It should be noted that the small sample size of this article does not speak to general or typical experiences of lesbians and gays in Belgium and should therefore be considered solely in the context of the participants interviewed.

Similarities and differences between the cases

For the two cases, Kevin and Axelle were the eldest siblings in their families. As described by Tilmans-Ostyn and Meynckens (2007, p. 41), the firstborn

sibling is often the "victim of some family ideals expressed by parents," wherein they are recognized as the target of parents' expectations. Furthermore, if the family expands, the firstborn becomes an elder sibling and is then expected to be a role model to their younger siblings. The coming out of a firstborn as LG may result in heightened anxiety from parents who fear that the elder sibling's sexual orientation may influence the younger siblings' own romantic and sexual relationships (LaSala, 2010).

Kevin and Axelle were also in similar developmental stages of life. Both had moved out of their family home and were living independently from their parents when they came out, which likely protected them from being more impacted by their parents' negative reactions, wherein their parents would have increased control over their finances, housing, and even health care. In the case of Kevin, he expressed intentionally moving away from his family as a means of having increased independence to openly live as a gay man. His brothers expressed appreciation for having physical distance from Kevin—this resulted in less impact on the family's position within their Romani community. Although not directly noted by Axelle's family, her physical distance from the family's original home may have helped her parents' emotional process of coming to accept Axelle's sexual orientation. The parents feared a loss of social position within their home community, so having physical distance from Axelle and Regine's relationship was likely helpful to them in that they could better control the timing and process of revealing Axelle's sexuality to others.

Another important similarity between the cases was that both Kevin and Axelle had achieved higher levels of education than their siblings, which is consistent with previous research (Rothblum, 2010). Rothblum found that many gay men move to large cities and are more highly educated than are heterosexual men as means to "perhaps to get away from their extended families, to have more anonymity, or to find a supportive LGB community" (p. 299). Although Axelle's sisters were also pursuing higher education, Axelle's more advanced status (likely as a result of being the eldest sibling) provided her with greater opportunities to achieve independence from her family as needed. In a different vein, Kevin had achieved a more advanced level of education than his younger brothers, which was related to Kevin's motivation to succeed, not his birth order in the family.

The participants discussed how the gender of family members impacted their coming-out process. The literature is quite unanimous about women being more likely to have positive attitudes toward LGBT people, which was consistent here (Ben-Ari, 1995; D'Augelli et al., 1998). Kevin noted that his stepsister and mother were accepting of his gay identity and that his mother accompanied him when he disclosed his sexual orientation to the men in his family as a means to provide an emotional buffer to potential negative responses. Similarly, Axelle's sisters discussed providing unwavering support

to Axelle by noting their desire to maintain a close sibling bond regardless of their parents' reaction as well as actively helping their parents come to a place of acceptance of Axelle.

Race and ethnicity was also an important element in this case comparison. Although both Kevin and Axelle's families had homophobic attitudes prior to their coming out, Kevin's roots in Romani culture appeared to demand strict gender-role expectations that negatively impacted his family's reaction to his sexual orientation (Bereczkei, 1998; Casey, 2014), particularly whether Kevin would be able to father Romani children. This point is especially important to make note of because it speaks to the long-term and widespread discrimination faced by the Romani people, including the genocide of hundreds of thousands of Romani during World War II. Thus Kevin's ability to father children is intrinsically linked to the historical trauma faced by his ethnic community. With that said, a major strength within Kevin's family was an unwavering acceptance from his brothers, despite their father's rejection of Kevin, which spoke to the brothers' adherence to familial bonds that outweighed the rejection of a gay sibling.

Kevin and Axelle also differed in their decision about to whom to come out first. Kevin came out to his mother first, whereas Axelle came out first to her sisters. Gender may have impacted their decisions, as research has shown that one's mother is often the first person to whom an LGBT family member comes out, followed by sisters (Toomey & Richardon, 2009), and that mothers and sisters are more likely to be accepting of their LGBT family member's sexuality (Toomey & Richardon, 2009).

Strengths and limitations

The current study was unique in its focus on sibling factors that influence the coming-out process, an understudied scholarly area. Similar to previous research (Hilton & Szymanski, 2011), the two cases studied in this article demonstrate (a) the important role siblings played in the coming-out process, and (b) how the coming out of a LG sibling improved communication between all of the siblings in the family.

With respect to limitations of the current study, it is important to point out that participants were recruited through networks related to the university. Thus the sample may have been skewed toward those who have the economic means and academic readiness to attend college. With respect to Kevin and Axelle, each of them had achieved a certain level of education and independence from their families that was possible via higher education. For Kevin, he was the only college-educated member of his family and was located in a regional area that afforded him access to socio-emotional support as a gay man that were not available to him in his home community. For Axelle, although she resided with her sisters and remained financially

connected to her parents, the physical distance of her residence to her parents' home, as well as the emotional independence she was afforded with being able to make important personal choices on her own, meant that she was not immediately impacted by her parents' disappointment when she came out to them as a lesbian.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that participants agreed to be interviewed about their experience of the coming-out process—both the LG sibling as well as their heterosexual siblings. Agreement to participate alludes to a certain level of acceptance of the LG sibling to allow for a joint interview to take place. Thus the findings of this study may not be consistent with the experiences of LG individuals from less tolerant or less accepting families.

Recommendations for future research and clinical practice

The current study provides a strong starting point in examining the important role of siblings in the coming-out process. Future studies should investigate preexisting factors within the sibling dynamic that contribute to both favorable and unfavorable coming-out experiences for the LG sibling. For example, an important area of focus for future research is to explore how gender impacts the supports and challenges experienced by the LG sibling once they come out to their family. Siblings described a responsibility to protect the lesbian or gay sibling that appeared shaped by gender—physical protection among Kevin's brothers and emotional protection among Axelle's sisters. The diverse ways siblings provide emotional and facilitative support, as impacted by gender and other cultural markers, is an important area to explore in future research.

Previous researchers have commented on the significant lack of attention given to the fundamental role that siblings play in providing a more supportive context for the LG adults within their family (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Hilton & Szymanski, 2011). Future researchers should investigate the role of siblings in the coming-out process, as well as the process in coming out to the more extended social network, such as friends and coworkers. Heatherington and Lavner (2008) also suggested further research on how the sibling subsystem and sibling roles (e.g, "the good child," "the trouble-maker") influence or impact the coming-out process in the family.

Clinicians working with LG adults should attend to the role of birth order, noting how this factor has impacted (or may impact) their relationships with family members upon coming out. Specifically, LaSala (2010) noted how LG adults who are the eldest siblings in their families face uniquely challenging reactions from their parents that include fear that they may emotionally harm their younger siblings. As noted by the LG participants in this study, there was a genuine fear that coming out would negatively impact the development of their younger siblings. This sense of pressure was at times

overwhelming to the participants and highlights the emotionally taxing decisions LG adults must make when deciding with whom to come out to as LG, as well as the order in which they come out to the various members of their family.

References

Ahrold, T. K., & Meston, C. M. (2010). Ethnic differences in sexual attitudes of U.S. college students: Gender, acculturation, and religiosity factors. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, *39*, 190–202. doi:10.1007/s10508-008-9406-1

Baams, L., Grossman, A. H., & Russell, S. T. (2015). Minority stress and mechanisms of risk for depression and suicidal ideation among lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth. *Developmental Psychology*, *51*, 688–696. doi:10.1037/a0038994

Baiocco, R., Santamaria, F., Ioverno, S., Fontanesi, L., Baumgartner, E., Laghi, F., & Lingiardi, V. (2015). Lesbian mother families and gay father families in Italy: Family functioning, dyadic satisfaction, and child well-being. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, *12*, 202–212. doi:10.1007/s13178-015-0185-x

Beaty, L. A. (1999). Identity development of homosexual youth and parental and familial influences on the coming out process. *Adolescence*, *34*, 597–601.

Ben-Ari, A. T. (1995). The discovery that an offspring is gay: Parents', gay men's, and lesbians' perspectives. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *30*(1), 89–112. doi:10.1300/J082v30n01_05

Bereczkei, T. (1998). Kinship network, direct childcare, and fertility among Hungarians and Gypsies. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, *19*, 283–298. doi:10.1016/S1090-5138(98)00027-0

Brearley, M. (2001). The persecution of Gypsies in Europe. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *45*, 588. doi:10.1177/00027640121957367

Casey, R. (2014). "Caravan wives" and "decent girls": Gypsy-Traveller women's perceptions of gender, culture, and morality in the North of England. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, *16*, 806–819. doi:10.1080/13691058.2014.911961

Costa, P. A., & Davies, M. (2012). Portuguese adolescents' attitudes toward sexual minorities: Transphobia, homophobia, and gender role beliefs. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *59*, 1424–1442. doi:10.1080/00918369.2012.724944

D'Augelli, A. R., Hershberger, S. L., & Pilkington, N. W. (1998). Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth and their families: Disclosure of sexual orientation and its consequences. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *68*, 361–371. doi:10.1037/h0080345

Ducommun-Nagy, C. (2006). *Ces loyautés qui nous libèrent*. Paris, France: J.C. Lattès, Le Masque.

Feinberg, M., Sakuma, K., Hostetler, M., & Mc Hale, S. (2013). Enhancing sibling relationships to prevent adolescent problem behaviours: Theory, design and feasibility of siblings are special. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, *36*, 97–106. doi:10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2012.08.003

Gelbart, P. (2012). Either sing or go get the beer: Contradictions of (Romani) female power in central Europe. *Signs*, *38*, 22–29. doi:10.1086/665944

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing.

Goffman, E. (1963). Embarrassment and social organization. In N. J. Smelser, W. T. Smelser, N. J. Smelser, & W. T. Smelser (Eds.), *Personality and social systems* (pp. 541–548). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley. doi:10.1037/11302-050

Gorman-Murray, A. (2008). Queering the family home: Narratives from gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth coming out in supportive family homes in Australia. *Gender, Place, and Culture*, *15*, 31–44. doi:10.1080/09663690701817501

Harvey, R. (2007). *The experience of disclosure of queer identity within sibling dyads* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Syracuse University, Syracuse,New York.

Haxhe, S., & D'Amore, S. (2014). Siblings in the coming-out process. In H. Pereira, & P. Costa (Eds.), *Coming-out for LGBT Psychology in the current international scenario* (pp. 298–305). Portugal: University of Beira Interior.

Heath, H., & Cowley, S. (2004). Developing a grounded theory approach: A comparison of Glaser and Strauss. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, *41*, 141–150. doi:10.1016/S0020-7489(03)00113-5

Heatherington, L., & Lavner, J. A. (2008). Coming to terms with coming out: Review and recommendations for family systems-focused research. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *22*, 329–343. doi:10.1037/0893-3200.22.3.329

Herek, G. M. (2000). Sexual prejudice and gender: Do heterosexuals' attitudes towards lesbians and gay men differ? *Journal of Social Issues*, *56*, 251–266. doi:10.1111/0022-4537.00164

Herek, G. M. (2002). Heterosexuals attitudes toward bisexual men and women in the United States. *Journal of Sex Research*, *39*, 264–274. doi:10.1080/00224490209552150

Herek, G. M. (2009). Hate crimes and stigma-related experiences among sexual minority adults in the United States: Prevalence estimates from a national probability sample. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *24*, 54–74. doi:10.1177/0886260508316477

Herek, G. M., & McLemore, K. A. (2013). Sexual prejudice. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *64*, 309–333. doi:10.1146/annurev-psych-113011-143826

Hilton, A., & Szymanski, D. (2011). Family dynamics and changes in sibling of origin relationship after lesbian and gay sexual orientation disclosure. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, *33*, 291–309. doi:10.1007/s10591-011-9157-3

LaSala, M. C. (2010). *Coming out, coming home: Helping families adjust to a gay or lesbian-child*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

McVeigh, R., & Diaz, M. D. (2009). Voting to ban same-sex marriage: Interests, values, and communities. *American Sociological Review*, *74*, 891–915. doi:10.1177/000312240907400603

Merighi, J. R., & Grimes, M. D. (2000). Coming out to families in a multicultural context. *Family in Society*, *81*, 32–41. doi:10.1606/1044-3894.1090

Page, M. L. (2015). Longitudinal predictors and effects of parental rejection of sexual minority youth. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, *76*, 1–129.

Rothblum, E. (2010). Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender siblings. In J. Caspi (Ed.), *Sibling development: Implications for mental health practitioners* (pp. 123–145). New York, NY: Springer.

Savin-Williams, R. C., & Dubé, E. M. (1998). Parental reactions to their child's disclosure of a gay/lesbian identity. *Family Relations*, *47*, 7–13. doi:10.2307/584845

Sherkat, D. E., De Vries, K. M., & Creek, S. (2010). Race, religion, and opposition to same-sex marriage. *Social Science Quarterly*, *91*, 80–98. doi:10.1111/j.1540-6237.2010.00682.x

Stormshak, E. A., Bellanti, C. J., & Bierman, K. L. (1996). The quality of sibling relationships and the development of social competence and behavioral control in aggressive children. *Developmental Psychology*, *32*, 79–89. doi:10.1037/0012-1649.32.1.79

Sulloway, F. J. (2010). Why siblings are like Darwin's finches: Birth order, sibling competition, and adaptive divergence within the family. In D. M. Buss & P. H. Hawley (Eds.), *The evolution of personality and individual differences* (pp. 86–119). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195372090.001.0001

Tesăr, C. (2012). Becoming Rom (male), becoming Romni (female) among Romanian Cortorari Roma: On body and gender. *Romani Studies*, *22*, 113–140. doi:10.3828/rs.2012.7

Tilmans-Ostyn, E., & Meynckens, M. (2007). *Les ressources de la fratrie*. Toulouse, France: Erès.

Toomey, R., & Richardon, R. A. (2009). Perceived sibling relationships of sexual minority youth. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *56*, 849–860. doi:10.1080/00918360903187812