

Georgia State University

ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University

---

Gerontology Theses

Gerontology Institute

---

5-7-2016

## Coming Out Late: The Impact on Individuals' Social Networks

Russell Elliott Spornberger MA  
*Georgia State University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/gerontology\\_theses](https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/gerontology_theses)

---

### Recommended Citation

Spornberger, Russell Elliott MA, "Coming Out Late: The Impact on Individuals' Social Networks." Thesis, Georgia State University, 2016.  
doi: <https://doi.org/10.57709/8474386>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Gerontology Institute at ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Gerontology Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gsu.edu).

# COMING OUT LATE: THE IMPACT ON INDIVIDUALS' SOCIAL NETWORKS

by

RUSSELL ELLIOTT SPORNBERGER

Under the Direction of Candace L. Kemp, Ph.D.

## ABSTRACT

Social support is a key factor influencing older adults' health and well-being. Disclosing one's lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity at any age has great potential for altering, if not destroying, existing relationships with family, friends, and others. With long-established social roles and personal relationships, the potential risks may be accentuated for those who come out in mid- or later-life. Yet, researchers have paid scant attention to this phenomenon. This exploratory qualitative study examines the impact of coming out "late" on older adults' social networks. In-depth interviews were conducted with a sample of fourteen older adults who disclosed their non-heterosexual identity at or after age 39. Interviews inquired about participants' past and present social networks and the coming out process, particularly the influence of coming out "off time." Findings show coming out is a dynamic, continuous, and non-linear process that simultaneously characterizes and is characterized by social network gains and losses.

INDEX WORDS: Social network, Coming out, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Older adult,

COMING OUT LATE: THE IMPACT ON INDIVIDUALS' SOCIAL NETWORKS

by

RUSSELL ELLIOTT SPORNBERGER

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2016

Copyright by  
Russell Elliott Spornberger  
2016

COMING OUT LATE: THE IMPACT ON INDIVIDUALS' SOCIAL NETWORKS

by

RUSSELL ELLIOTT SPORNBERGER

Committee Chair: Candace L. Kemp

Committee: Elisabeth O. Burgess

Jennifer Craft Morgan

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

May 2016

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this paper to the study participants who so generously gave of their time and so willingly shared their life stories with me. I cannot thank them enough for their kindness, generosity, and trust.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I wish to acknowledge Ms. Christina Cummings and Dr. Heyig “Jenny” Zhan for the instrumental roles they played in my enrolling in the Gerontology program here at Georgia State. I also wish to thank my classmates, too numerous to name, for their advice, encouragement, and friendship over these past few years. Finally, I wish to thank my thesis committee: Dr. Candace L. Kemp, Chair; Dr. Elisabeth O. Burgess, and Dr. Jennifer Craft Morgan for their patience, faith, and unwavering support for myself and this project. It is my hope and prayer that I have returned the many kindnesses received from those mentioned here with the same graciousness with which they so generously bestowed them.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
LIST OF TABLES .....	ix
LIST OF FIGURES .....	x
<b>1 INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2 LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2.1 Literature Review Research Domains.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<i>2.1.1 Coming Out:.....</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>2.1.2 Conceptualizing Coming Out Late:.....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>2.1.3 Coming Out as a Family Process:.....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>2.1.4 Coming Out Late and Family Relations:.....</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>2.1.5 The Social Impact of Coming Out Late:.....</i>	<i>15</i>
<b>2.2 Literature Review Limitations.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>2.3 Literature Review Summary.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>3 METHODS.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>3.1 Methods Rationale.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>3.2 Participants and Recruitment.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>3.3 Data Collection: Semi-structured Interviews and Network Mapping .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>3.4 Analysis .....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>4 PARTICIPANTS .....</b>	<b>28</b>



<b>4.1</b>	<b>Social and Demographic Characteristics of the Participants.....</b>	<b>28</b>
4.1.1	<i>Age, Gender, and Race .....</i>	<i>28</i>
4.1.2	<i>Marital Status and Household Configuration .....</i>	<i>28</i>
4.1.3	<i>Education and Income.....</i>	<i>29</i>
4.1.4	<i>Religious Affiliation.....</i>	<i>30</i>
4.1.5	<i>Sexual Orientation .....</i>	<i>30</i>
4.1.6	<i>Age of Coming Out .....</i>	<i>31</i>
<b>4.2</b>	<b>Historical Context (location in time, place, and social structure): .....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>4.3</b>	<b>Case Examples .....</b>	<b>41</b>
4.3.1	<i>Case Example 1: Renee: Borderline Relations.....</i>	<i>41</i>
4.3.2	<i>Case Example 2: Michael: A Divided Life.....</i>	<i>45</i>
4.3.3	<i>Case Example 3: Matthew: Family Lost and Family Found.....</i>	<i>47</i>
4.3.4	<i>Case Example 4: Theresa: Return to the Closet.....</i>	<i>51</i>
<b>4.4</b>	<b>The Core Category: Gaining and Losing.....</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>GAINING and LOSING .....</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>5.1</b>	<b>Gaining and Losing .....</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>5.2</b>	<b>Gaining and Losing Factors .....</b>	<b>60</b>
5.2.1	<i>Homophobia:.....</i>	<i>60</i>
5.2.2	<i>Religion/Religiosity:.....</i>	<i>63</i>
5.2.3	<i>Ageism:.....</i>	<i>66</i>

5.2.4 <i>Community</i> .....	68
5.2.5 <i>Social Media</i> .....	73
5.2.6 <i>Protective Strategies</i> .....	74
5.3 <b>Gaining and Losing Summary</b> .....	79
<b>6 DISCUSSION &amp; IMPLICATIONS</b> .....	80
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	88
<b>APPENDICES</b> .....	96
<b>Appendix A: Interview Guide</b> .....	96
<b>Appendix B: Informed Consent Form</b> .....	113
<b>Appendix C: Participant Recruitment Information Sheet</b> .....	115
<b>Appendix D: Code Book</b> .....	116

**LIST OF TABLES**

Table 3.1 Recruitment Methods.....	20
Table 3.2 Participant Summary.....	22

**LIST OF FIGURES**

Figure 5.1 Evolving Social Network: Gaining and Losing..... 59

## 1 INTRODUCTION

There is an extensive body of work on the process of “coming out” as gay or lesbian and the consequences of so doing. Although an abundance of research has been devoted to this topic in the past forty-plus years, to date, most of the literature examining coming out has been focused on the experiences of adolescents and young adults or at least not directly concerned with older age as a variable. There is a dearth of research of those who come out later in life (i.e., 39 years and over; see Chapter 3 for rationale) (Allen, 2005; Buxton, 2004, 2006; Fruhauf & colleagues, 2009; Johnston & Jenkins, 2004; Rickards & Wuest, 2006; Sasser, 2006). Coming out late in life has great potential to upend existing relationships not only within the family, but also among friends, colleagues, and others in one’s social network. Those who come out at mid-life or later are likely to have lived life as a heterosexual, or presented/“passed” as heterosexual until the time of disclosure to others (Rosenfeld, 2003). They probably are married or have been married to an opposite sex partner. They may have children or even grandchildren. As adults at mid- or later life, they likely have established careers, as well as long-time friendships. Indeed, up until disclosing their homosexuality to someone important in their lives, they have enjoyed a certain status in the community that was predicated on a self-presentation as heterosexual (Johnston & Jenkins, 2004; Rickards & Wuest, 2006).

The overall aging of the population presents new opportunities, as well as demands on families. With an increasing number of kin surviving into old age, the duration of intergenerational ties is lengthening (Connidis, 2010; Hagestad, 2003) and consequently, more important (Bengtson, 2001). Parents and their adult children provide substantial support to one another over the life course (Connidis, 2010). After spouses, adult children, usually middle-aged

daughters, provide most of the informal care needed by elderly parents (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1998). Though not a majority, many adult children clearly make up the links in the chains of interdependencies between generations within families, as they are tasked with caring for the young and the old simultaneously (Connidis, 2010). However, nowadays adult children may be older adults themselves that need some form of assistance. Grandchildren may be young adults or even middle-aged. Thus, the aging of the population is leading to links across generations within families that have not been seen before at least in terms of the sheer number of families experiencing this verticalization (Hagestad, 2003). Simply, many people will know their parents and children, grandparents, and grandchildren, even great-grandparents and great-grandchildren for longer periods of time over the life course (Connidis, 2010). The opportunities for family members to interact and share support of any type: socio-emotive, material, caregiving, and so on will increase in number, as well as time. For example, more and more grandparents are having to raise their grandchildren for any number of reasons including incarceration; alcohol and drug addiction; teenage pregnancy; AIDS; single-parenthood; illness; and child abuse (Prokos & Keene, 2012). Consequently, some older adults who may need care themselves, are saddled with the additional burden of caring for the children of their children (Kelley, Whitley, & Campos, 2010). In sum, the individual life course no longer unfolds along a path of cultural touchstones of progressive roles that are clearly defined and set in their sequence. Instead with increased life expectancies, at any given point in adult life, individuals may find themselves simultaneously giving and receiving social support in a variety of roles within their family and greater social network.

Aging poses particular problems for gay and lesbian individuals. Older gay and lesbian individuals are more likely to not be partnered and to not have children thus limiting available

informal care options to friends (Services and Advocacy for GLBT Elders (SAGE) & LGBT Movement Advancement Project (MAP), 2010). Despite their willingness, non-kin, or what is often referred to as “families of choice”, may be unable to provide the care necessary for an older gay/lesbian person as their condition grows worse (Muraco & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2011). Additionally, as Muraco & Fredriksen-Goldsen (2011) note caregiving friends usually do not have any legal standing to make critical medical decisions, nor do they want such responsibility. Social support has been found to be critical for the health and well-being of aging gay and lesbian individuals. For example, Fredriksen-Goldsen et al. (2013) found a negative relationship between poor health and the amount of social support gay and lesbian individuals receive and the size of their social networks. In sum, the maintenance of ties of older gay and lesbian adults with members of their social network is often an important factor for their health and well-being.

Coming out marks not just a change in the identity of the individual who is coming out, but a change in the identity of the family itself (Baptist & Allen, 2008; Li & Orleans, 2001; Seidman, 2002; Strommen, 1989). When a mid-life or older adult comes out, the bonds within the family may be greatly strained (Johnston & Jenkins, 2004). The links that provide material and emotional support between family members may be broken for many years, if not forever (Lynch & Murray, 2000). Such disruption and dissolution could cause a steeper decline in the trajectory of individual life courses, as well as for the family as a whole.

I posit that coming out at age 40 and beyond presents unique challenges and opportunities for those who do so, and for those close to them. Regardless of the seemingly free and open atmosphere toward gay and lesbian individuals in today’s society, coming out late in life has great potential for upsetting and realigning an individual’s existing social networks, bending the trajectory of one’s own life course, as well as the life courses of those with whom they have

important relationships. For these reasons, understanding the impact that coming out of an individual at mid- or later has on their social relationships is of paramount importance. Thus, the overall aim of this study is to understand how the "coming out" process in mid or later life impacts the social support networks of gay and lesbian adults. With this goal in the mind, the study addresses these questions:

- 1) In what ways does coming out later in life affect relationships with family and friends?
- 2) How, if at all, have these relationships changed over time?
- 3) What factors lead to variation in how coming out later in life affects an individual's social support networks?



## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Given that there is scant research on those who come out later in life, this review focused on the existing literature that if not directly concerned with the impact of coming out later in life on one's social networks, at least illuminated some of the issues one might face by coming out at mid- or later life. I have categorized the research reviewed into five domains:

- 1) Coming Out; an examination of how coming out and the consequences of doing so are viewed today.
- 2) Conceptualizing Coming Out Late; for purposes of this study how I defined "coming out late"
- 3) Coming Out as a Family Process; how coming out involves an individual's family, not just the individual coming out.
- 4) Coming Out Late and Family Relations; how one's social position within a family influences the coming out process.
- 5) The Social Impact of Coming Out Late; the impact coming out/coming out late has on one's broader social network.

I close this chapter with a brief discussion of the limitations of this literature review and a summary of its findings.

### 2.1 Literature Review Research Domains

#### 2.1.1 *Coming Out:*

Coming out is not a singular event. As we know it today, coming out is a continuous, indeed, a lifelong process of disclosure of one's sexual identity/orientation (Morrow, 1996; Orel, 2004). Heterosexuality is the presumptive sexual orientation/identity ascribed to individuals in

our society. Thus the process of coming out is repeated as one navigates new situations and relationships (Kus, 1985; Morrow, 1996; Rickards & Wuest, 2006). However, for an individual to take the first step, and disclose their true identity to another is to take a considerable risk (Seidman, 2002). Coming out to another, particularly to someone with whom there is a close personal relationship is perhaps an irreversible step that can change one's life forever. In other words, in terms of one's social world, coming out could potentially bear a very high cost.

The never ending, lifelong process of coming out may yield beneficial effects for some individuals. An individual's capacity of resilience may increase as one affirms their true identity to others with each new social encounter (Orel, 2004; Rickards & Wuest, 2006). However, gay identification and the stigma associated with it have been shown to have a negative effect on mental health in mid-life and older gay males (Wight, LeBlanc, de Vries, & Detels, 2012). Likewise, Fredriksen-Goldsen and colleagues (2013) found that internalized stigma predicted disability and depression in older gay, lesbian, and bisexual adults.

### ***2.1.2 Conceptualizing Coming Out Late:***

As already noted, there is little research on individuals who come out later in life. Not surprisingly, a common definition or understanding of the idea of "coming out late" does not seem to exist. Extant research provides little guidance in conceptualizing the idea of "coming out late". Indeed, the idea that there is a "closet" to come out of is a fairly modern concept (Seidman, 2002). Consequently, the definition of "coming out" has changed within our culture over time. In the 1930's, "coming out" meant one's first same-sex experience (Bérubé, 1990). By WWII, "coming out" meant one had found gay friends, and a gay lifestyle (Bérubé, 1990). Lynch and Murray (2000) defined coming out as self-disclosure to one's family or having had another disclose one's sexuality to one's family, specifically their children. In a recent report of a

comprehensive study of the older LGBT population, “being out” was described as disclosure of one’s sexual orientation to others, that is coming out to another person (Fredriksen - Goldsen et al., 2012).

The closet was/is a survival strategy that originated in reaction to the increased policing and regulation of same-sex behavior in the 1950’s and 1960’s (Rosenfeld, 2003; Seidman, 2002). Rosenfeld (2003) notes that the liberationist discourse of coming out simply did not exist “pre-Stonewall.” (for an overview of the Stonewall riot and its aftermath see “Stonewall Riots” (Matzner, 2011). Seidman (2002) describes “the closet” as a “*life shaping pattern* [emphasis mine] of homosexual concealment” (p. 26) and a space of “social isolation” (p. 30). According to Seidman (2002), being in the closet is to hide one’s true identity from some of the most important people in one’s life. One is socially isolated, emotionally distant from family and friends, while at the same time afraid to connect with other homosexuals (Seidman, 2002). Internalized homophobia manifested in feelings of shame, guilt, and fear keeps individuals locked in the closet (Seidman, 2002). This description of the closet is a modern one that shapes our ideas of what coming out means.

If “coming out” is revealing one’s sexual orientation to others, what might be meant by “coming out late”? A life course perspective with its blending of chronological age, social age, and historical time (Elder & Rockwell, 1979) is useful in conceptualizing “coming out late”. First, looking at chronological age, “coming out late” becomes relative to the question, “On average, by what age have people usually come out?” In regards to this question, existing research provides some pertinent findings. For example, around 88.5% of participants in an early study of assumption/acceptance of a “gay” identity ( $N=182$ ) had come out by age 25 (Dank, 1971). A more recent study ( $N=767$ ) found that 97% of participants had come out to someone

other than a parent by a mean age of 22.8 (Floyd & Bakeman, 2006). Another relatively recent study ( $N = 2,733$ ) looked at cohort (among other variables) differences in coming out, it found that even among an older cohort, 55+ ( $n = 204$ ) that women had come out by a mean age of 27.4 and men by 24.1 (Grov, Bimbi, Nanín, & Parsons, 2006). Finally, a 2013 online survey ( $N = 1,197$ ) of LGBT individuals found that men had come out as gay by an average age of 18, and women had come out as lesbian by an average age of 21 (Pew Research Center, 2013). Thus at least some of the existing research suggests that many “out” gay or lesbian individuals are “out” well before age thirty.

The idea of “social age” is another way to view the concept of “coming out late”. Social age considers that there is a “prescriptive timetable for the ordering of major life events” (Neugarten, Moore, & Lowe, 1965, p. 711). Neugarten et al. (1965) delineated many such norms, to name a few: best age to marry, “prime of life”, and retirement age. More recent research work has affirmed Neugarten and colleagues’ pioneering work, finding that individuals perceive that there is a right time for certain family transitions including leaving home, marriage, childbearing, and grandparenthood among others (Settersten & Hagestad, 1996). Thus, “norms” exist within society that govern individual development across the life course (Neugarten et al., 1965; Settersten & Hagestad, 1996). These norms set the “appropriate” timing and sequence of events, necessary to the assumption of certain social roles such as completing one’s education, establishing a career, and getting married. Following the logic of the concept of “social age”, the idea of “coming out late” might be considered an “off-time” or out-of-sequence event. In such a sense, “coming out late” would upset the “normal”, culturally recognized course of life, in that one is assuming one’s sexual identity at a much later age than the prescribed age of somewhere between adolescence and young adult. Arguably, the “off-time” assumption and disclosure of

sexual identity at mid- or later life by an individual could wreak havoc on that individual's existing, established relationships with family, friends, and others, as those existing relationships were grounded one's heretofore presentation as heterosexual or silence on the issue of sexual preference.

Historical time is another factor in the conceptualization of "coming out late." For instance, older cohorts of lesbian and gays experienced severe oppression due to common and institutionalized beliefs that homosexuality was deviant (Altman, 1999; Fredriksen - Goldsen et al., 2013; Peacock, 2000; Seidman, 2002). Many felt terribly constrained, repressing their desires or living dangerous dual lives: publically heterosexual and privately, secretly homosexual.

However, cohort is not simply defined by being born within the same certain time period. Rosenfeld (2003) found that the older gays and lesbians of the same generation that participated in her study could be categorized into two "identity cohorts" (p. 89): 1) discreditable and 2) accredited. The discreditable identity cohort was marked by those who passed as heterosexual to maintain certain social status, yet privately led a homosexual life. According to Rosenfeld (2003), for these individuals, sexual preference was an aspect of their personalities, not the core of their identity. Those in the accredited identity cohort adopted a "liberationist" identity. For the accredited, sexual preference was a defining characteristic of one's core being, not just a quirk of personality. Thus, for the accredited identity cohort, being out is essential to one's personal integrity. Those individuals that Rosenfeld (2003) categorized as "discreditable" identified as homosexual at age 40 or younger and did so during or before the early 1960's. Thus, individuals in the discreditable identity cohort adopted a homosexual identity during a historical period when the discourse on homosexuality was marked by stigma, deviance, and abnormality. To be homosexual was to be less than others in society. At best, homosexuals were to be pitied, and at

worst, they were to be persecuted. Those individuals that Rosenfeld (2003) categorized as “accredited” identified as homosexual at age 40 or older and did so during or after the early 1960’s. Those of the same generation who came of age, that is adopted a homosexual identity in different historical eras, (often oversimplified as pre-Stonewall versus post-Stonewall), assumed different identities. Thus gay and lesbian individuals in Rosenfeld’s (2003) study that came out later in life had a liberationist discourse available to guide them.

A comparison of average ages of coming out in the studies noted here, Dank (1971) to Floyd and Bakeman (2006) to Pew Research Center (2013), suggests that individuals are coming out at earlier ages perhaps due to increasing acceptance of sexual diversity in society. This apparent shift in societal attitudes might eventually extinguish the necessity of coming out at all. In sum, what constitutes “coming out” for today’s young people is arguably quite different in timing, meaning, and process, than for those of older generations. Indeed, by definition, “coming out” has been relocated from the context of joining a secret group of insiders to the context of living openly as a gay or lesbian individual.

To conclude, for purposes of this study, I define “coming out late” as disclosure of one’s sexual orientation to someone important in an individual’s life such as a family member, close friend, or colleague at or after age 40. Forty is commonly thought of as middle-age (Neugarten et al., 1965). By age 40 the normative expectations for adults including an established career, marriage, and parenthood (Neugarten et al., 1965; R. A. Settersten Jr. & Hagestad, 1996) are likely to have been achieved. Intertwined with these expectations is the realization of sexual identity. As previous research indicates many “out” individuals are out by an average age of less than thirty (Dank, 1971; Floyd & Bakeman, 2006; Grov et al., 2006; Pew Research Center,

2013). Thus, coming out at or after age 40 is an off-time event, positioned well beyond normative expectations of society and the actual experiences of many individuals.

### ***2.1.3 Coming Out as a Family Process:***

Coming out is not just an individual process. It is a process that reshapes the life of an individual, as well as that of their family (Baptist & Allen, 2008; Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Buxton, 2004; Davies, 2008; Strommen, 1989). For example, a qualitative study of coming out among some young Asian-American lesbians outlined the general steps of one path to coming out (Li & Orleans, 2001). First, there was an individual's self-realization and self-acceptance of a lesbian identity. Next, the individual would come out to their family. The disclosure of homosexual identity to one's family would lead to the family going into denial. In order to maintain the family's honor in the greater Asian-American community the family would essentially go into the closet to keep the secret of having a homosexual in the family. With time and the onus of the Asian-American value of family unity, the family would come to accept their daughter for who she was, and support her. Finally, the family would come out to the Asian-American community. Thus the individual identity crisis of coming out became a family identity crisis finally resolved by the compelling Asian-American value of family unity.

Similarly, Baptist & Allen (2008) followed the gradual coming out process of "Jack" an adolescent male and his family. Jack first came out to his best friend. Then he came out to one of his sisters. Finally, he came out to his parents. Like the Asian-American families that Li and Orleans (2001) studied, Jack's White middle-class family first went into a state of denial. Relationships among members Jack's family were strained as they negotiated the change in identity of the family, caused by Jack's coming out. As they worked through the issue of Jack's gay identity, his family became concerned for his personal safety. Eventually, the family came to

accept and embrace their gay son/brother. Finally, the family “went public” with Jack’s and their new identity by becoming politically involved in the LGBT civil rights movement. Thus the coming out crisis of a single family member, became a crisis for the entire family, which ultimately changed the attitudes and beliefs of each family member, as well as the family’s identity as a whole.

Coming out does not always lead to positive, life-affirming outcomes. Some persons who are publically “out” may internalize the homophobia found in society at large. They may never truly accept their gay/lesbian identity leaving them susceptible to substance abuse, depression, and hopelessness (Kus, 1985). Likewise, how a family copes with the coming out process may not always be ultimately positive. As a whole, a family may never come to terms with the news that a member is gay/lesbian. Total rejection of a gay/lesbian relative is certainly a possibility (Lynch & Murray, 2000).

To summarize, coming out is a family process. The coming out of a family member offers a family the opportunity to forge a new, more authentic identity for both the individual coming out, as well as the individual’s family. Initially, relatives may struggle with the revelation that a family member is gay or lesbian. Eventually, family members may form deeper, more meaningful relationships as they deal with the reality of having a close relative who is a gay or lesbian. Unfortunately, a positive outcome is in no way guaranteed. When a family member comes out, the family may also go into denial. Irreparable rifts may sever bonds between family members. The negative reactions of family members, as well as internalized homophobia of a lesbian or gay person can lead individuals to engage in self-destructive behaviors, further exacerbating rifts in family relations.



#### ***2.1.4 Coming Out Late and Family Relations:***

Middle age and older adults often play multiple roles within a family. These roles can include that of spouse, parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, as well as adult child. These relationships further complicate coming out at mid- or late life. Research by Buxton (2004, 2006) demonstrates that many who come out in mid- life or later are in a relationship with an opposite-sex partner. Thus they are likely to be parents themselves, as well as the adult children/step-children of their own surviving parents. In addition to, or other than biological children, they may be parents of adopted children or step-children. They might even be grandparents. If they have brothers or sisters, then they are also likely to be aunts or uncles. Through their own marriages and/or that of their siblings they are in-laws to someone, thus extending their family relations beyond their family of origin. Each of these relationships is a thread in the intricate fabric of family. Assumption of a gay or lesbian sexual orientation at mid-life or later in life can greatly alter or even end certain family relationships.

Coming out in mid- or later life often involves a prolonged negotiation with an opposite-sex spouse or partner (Buxton, 2006). Such negotiations may not immediately lead to separation or divorce. According to Buxton (2006), around a third of married couples try to maintain their marital union after a spouse comes out. About 50% of couples remain married for three or more years (Buxton, 2006). Remaining married may or may not be desirable. For example, one study found that gay fathers who remained with their wives were less satisfied with those relationships and the degree of intimacy within them than were gay fathers who left their wives for a same-sex relationship (Tornello & Patterson, 2012). The presence of children may also influence the decision to continue an opposite-sex union. Finances, motherly love, and a sense of parental responsibility, as well as spousal bond are reasons some women may want to stay married after

coming out (Buxton, 2004). The impact that a spouse's coming out has on the heterosexual partner can be devastating (Buxton, 2006, 2012). The heterosexual spouse may need anywhere from three to six years to overcome the self-doubts, pain, anger, and resentment caused when a spouse comes out (Buxton, 2006).

There has been a fair amount of research into the subject of lesbian and gay parenting (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). However, much of this work attempts to show that there are no differences in outcomes for children raised by gay or lesbian parents compared to those raised by heterosexual parents (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). In their critique of the literature on gay/lesbian parenting, Stacey and Biblarz (2001) assert that research findings of no differences between children raised by heterosexual couples and those raised by same-sex couples are "implausible" (p. 163). Stacey and Biblarz, (2001) note that the failure to reveal the likely differences between gay/lesbian and heterosexual parents risks gaining deeper understandings of "child development and psychology [and] the sociology of sexuality, gender, and family more broadly" (p. 162). Additionally, little, if any, of the work on gay and lesbian parenting has been concerned with the relationships of gay or lesbian parents with their adult children (Connidis, 2010). The impact of coming out at mid/late life has on the members of the family and their relationships in terms of social support, or for example, intergenerational exchange with adult children has not been extensively explored.

The effects on children of a parent coming out may vary by the age of the children. For example, compared to adolescent children, younger children may be much less affected, if at all, by a parent's coming out (Lynch & Murray, 2000; Rickards & Wuest, 2006). Adolescents may reflect the homophobic messages that exist in society/culture, as well as the homophobic reactions of their peers (Rickards & Wuest, 2006; Tasker, Barrett, & De Simone, 2010). Davies

(2008) found that adult daughters whose mothers came out in later life experienced doubts about their own sexual identity. Although some gay fathers may have strained relationships with their adult children, their adult children may serve as the critical links in the process of these gay men coming out to their grandchildren (Fruhauf et al., 2009).

Stepfamilies formed by gay or lesbian partners may closely manage information about the nature of their families including the timing, degree, and to whom such information is revealed. Such guarded disclosure is often attributable to concerns about child custody or the belief that having gay/lesbian parents may stigmatize the children (Lynch & Murray, 2000). Deferring to wishes of their children/step-children, as well as their own parents, lesbian or gay stepparents may be very discrete in public or even among some family members about their sexual orientation or affection for each other (Lynch & Murray, 2000).

For many gay and lesbian individuals “family”, means a family of choice, that is a network of close friends (Muraco, 2006; SAGE & MAP, 2010). Muraco (2006) also found that heterosexual individuals had friends that they consider family. However, the key distinction between heterosexuals and gays and lesbians, particularly among older adults, is the fact that due to their sexual orientation, gays and lesbians are likely to be estranged from their families of origin and the support they might provide (SAGE & MAP, 2010). Thus friendships can be critical to social support in later life for older gay and lesbian individuals.

### ***2.1.5 The Social Impact of Coming Out Late:***

Those who come out later in life cite several different reasons for doing so, among them: could no longer live a lie; became attracted to someone of the same-sex; increased social support (such as therapy); or a sense that life was going nowhere (Johnston & Jenkins, 2004). Some individuals simply may not realize they are attracted to someone of the same-sex until after

having married and parented (Orel, 2004). Individuals who are currently fifty years old and older grew up in times when homosexuality was considered deviant or even criminal behavior that required psychiatric help and/or institutionalization. Thus in order to protect themselves, many older individuals who were attracted to those of the same sex repressed their feelings and kept their true sexual identity a secret (Peacock, 2000).

Coming out in mid- or later life can be a very risky proposition. Fears of losing essentially all that is important in one's life, including family, career, and social status can possess the thoughts of those who come out at mid-life (and presumably beyond) (Johnston & Jenkins, 2004). Women who come out in mid-adulthood may lose their heterosexual privilege and may be stigmatized by their newly assumed sexual orientation (Sasser, 2006). The losses women face when they come out at mid-life can be devastating including losing friendships, financial security, and personal safety (Sasser, 2006). In contrast, Gay men who successfully "pass" as heterosexual enjoy all the privilege and social status afforded heterosexual men in our society (Seidman, 2002). Further, Seidman (2002) notes that men who express a feminine gender may lose the social status given to heterosexual men or men that present as heterosexual. Thus social privileges are granted to those whose gender expression matches their perceived biological sex, as well as their perceived sexuality.

Fredriksen-Goldsen and colleagues (2013) found that social support and the size of an individual's social network acted as protective factors among the older gays, lesbians, and bisexuals who participated in their study. Those who come out at mid- or later life may find that there are few, if any, social supports for their journey (Shankle, Maxwell, Katzman, & Landers, 2003). Men who come out later in life may not feel connected to the local gay community to which they are coming out due to a lack of shared memory and experience (Tester, 2012). In

sum, while coming out late in life might be spiritually uplifting and life affirming for some, it also presents the possibilities of loss of social status, impoverishment, stigmatization, and isolation for others.

## **2.2 Literature Review Limitations**

There is very little research on coming out late in life. Much more research is needed to understand the impact coming out late has on the individuals' social networks. Most of the articles reviewed here were of studies dominated by samples of White, middle class, and educated individuals. Additionally, virtually all the research presented here is from studies that involved small populations and convenience samples. In order to give voice to other racial, ethnic, and social classes of gay and lesbian families, future research should be targeted at such populations and future research should utilize larger and more diverse samples. This is easier said than done, as various racial, ethnic, and class groups may more severely marginalize gay and lesbian individuals making identifying and accessing these populations more difficult.

## **2.3 Literature Review Summary**

Coming out as gay or lesbian is an individual process and it is a family process. The coming out of an individual often leads to the individual's family redefining itself as well. These new individual and collective identities may be welcomed and embraced or denied and rejected. A lifetime accumulation of social capital can be lost, when at mid-life or later, one takes the risk of assuming one's true (or new?) sexual identity and comes out as gay or lesbian. Social and material support between generations sustains families over time giving individuals needed assistance to grow and prosper. The coming out of an individual later in life may or may not disrupt positive patterns of intergenerational exchange within a family or cause the dissolution of family ties. Likewise, when an individual comes out, other social relationships such as those with

close friends or colleagues may be affected, either in a positive or a negative way. Again, little is known about the impact that coming out at mid or later life has on an individual and their network of social support.

### 3 METHODS

#### 3.1 Methods Rationale

The purpose of this study is to explore how coming out at mid-life or later affect individuals' social networks and what the experience of these network changes mean for individuals who come out mid-life or later. With these goals in mind, I chose qualitative research methods as most appropriate. As Crouch and McKenzie (2006) have argued a qualitative, exploratory study is not so much concerned with finding the proportions of variables within a population, but rather to reveal the themes and contextual realities that are the salient factors in the creation and maintenance of particular social worlds. Such factors are often hidden from direct observation, or at least not readily apparent. Additionally, respondents may be unaware of the social structures that constrain them (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). A qualitative, exploratory study utilizing in-depth, semi-structured interviews should produce data rich in detail, and so reveal the deeper meanings of personal subjective experience, its context, and the processes of its creation (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006).

#### 3.2 Participants and Recruitment

Two sampling criteria were used to determine eligibility to participate in the study. Participants had to: 1) have come out as gay or lesbian at age 39 or older (initially set at age 40 but lowered to 39 in order to bolster the number of female participants), and 2) be community-dwelling. I employed convenience sampling methods to recruit study participants. As shown in Table 3.1, participants learned of the study a variety of ways. Two participants were known to me through membership in an organization for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender older adults. Five participants were recruited through friends/ associates of mine that had reported that they had a friend who came out later in life. In three of these cases, these contacts acted as

intermediaries passing on an informational flyer (see Appendix C) and the informed consent (see Appendix B) to the likely participants. After receiving information about the study, these recruits contacted me and agreed to participate.

In January 2015, I gave a brief presentation of the study at a meeting of a local affiliate of a national organization dedicated to the aid of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender older adults. The presentation focused on the literature review. It also offered some preliminary data (demographics and quotes from interviews) that demonstrated the need and the importance of the research. After the presentation, two people volunteered to participate in the study. Another person who attended this presentation had a friend he thought would be interested and he referred her. She contacted me and agreed to join the study.

In February 2015, I attended a meeting of a local chapter of an international organization for older gay men. At the visitor introduction, I gave a very brief announcement about the study. Four people gave me their contact information after the meeting. The first three I contacted agreed to participate in the study. This brought the total number of participants in the study to thirteen. I did not attempt to recruit the fourth volunteer as there were already enough men in the study. Finally, one participant was recruited by snowballing. The following table summarizes the recruitment methods:

**Table 3.1 Recruitment Methods**

<b>Recruitment Method</b>	<b>Number Recruited</b>
Known to Researcher	2
Referred by Friend	5
As Result of Presentation	2
Presentation Prompted Referral of a Friend	1
As Result of Brief Announcement	3
Snowball	1
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>14</b>



The initial goal for the sample size was 12 participants. This goal was exceeded. A total of 14 participants were finally recruited of which 8 were men and 6 were women. Like many other studies the sample is overwhelmingly White and well-educated. For example, samples recruited for the following studies were dominated by one or both of these characteristics: Bybee, Sullivan, Zielonka, & Moes, 2009; Calzo, Antonucci, Mays, & Cochran, 2011; Davies, 2008; Floyd & Bakeman, 2006; Fruhauf, Orel, & Jenkins, 2009. Table 3.2 summarizes key characteristics of the sample. A detailed description of the participants is provided in Chapter 4.

**Table 3.2 Participant Summary**

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Coming Out Age</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Region of Origin</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Religious Tradition</i>	<i>Current Religious Affiliation</i>	<i>Current Marital Status</i>	<i>Living Arrangement</i>	<i>Children</i>
<b>Alice</b>	73	39	NA	Midwest	Undergraduate	Protestant	Atheist	Married	With spouse	Yes
<b>Anna</b>	72	42	W	Northeast	Post-graduate	Protestant	None	Widowed	With adult child	Yes
<b>David</b>	71	66	B	Northeast	Undergraduate	Protestant	Other	Divorced	With roommate	Yes
<b>Frank</b>	75	41	W	Germany	Post-graduate	Protestant	None	Divorced	By self	Yes
<b>James</b>	65	50	W	Northeast	Undergraduate	Protestant	Protestant	Divorced	By self	Yes
<b>John</b>	75	69	W	Northeast	Post-graduate	Catholic	Catholic	Divorced	By self	Yes
<b>Luke</b>	68	56	W	Midwest	Post-graduate	Protestant	None	Divorced	By self	Yes
<b>Mary</b>	73	43	W	Southeast	Undergraduate	Protestant	Other	Never married	By self	No
<b>Matthew</b>	65	51	W	Southeast	Undergraduate	Catholic	None	Never married	By self	No
<b>Michael</b>	59	43	W	Southeast	Undergraduate	Protestant	None	Never married	With roommate	No
<b>Renee</b>	58	40	W	Southeast	Post-graduate	Protestant	Other	Divorced	By self	No
<b>Ruth</b>	72	49	W	Northeast	Post-graduate	Judaism	None	Domestic partnership	With partner	Yes
<b>Theresa</b>	82	42	W	Southeast	High school	Protestant	Protestant	Divorced	By self	Yes
<b>William</b>	77	42	W	Northeast	Post-graduate	Catholic	Other	Married	With spouse	Yes

### 3.3 Data Collection: Semi-structured Interviews and Network Mapping

I used semi-structured, in-depth interviews to collect the data. I created an interview guide that focused on the research questions of this study. The guide consisted of two sections: 1) a short demographic survey and 2) a semi-structured interview. As designed, the qualitative portion of the interview consisted of five parts: 1) Background, 2) Social Network Before Coming Out, 3) Coming Out, 4) Social Network Today, and 5) Reflections. A complete copy of the interview guide is included in Appendix A.

The beginning of each interview focused on the participant's background: growing up, parents, siblings, schooling, religion, and so on, as well as, the participant's social life as a young adult. Part 2 focused on the participant's social relations before beginning the coming out process. Here the social network hierarchical mapping diagram (Antonucci, 1986) was introduced as a prompt to help respondents visualize their social networks and rank the importance of the people comprising their social networks. The diagram consists of three concentric circles with "YOU" printed in the innermost circle. The inner circle is for those closest in relationship to the respondent. One might describe the people within the inner circle as persons that one could not live without or could not imagine life without. The middle ring is for those that are close, but not as important in one's life. The outer circle I described to participants as "in your personal network, but not necessarily very important or very close to you." Persons in ring 3 might include co-workers, co-members of clubs or other organizations, fellow church members and so on. In addition to the questions regarding each of the three rings, I asked participants if they identified with a larger community, for example: ethnic, religious, or the "gay" community.

Part 3 of the interview was concerned with the coming out process. The questions here included, among others: Why did you come out when you did? Who did you come out to first? What sort of reactions did you experience? and How did you feel when you first began the coming out process?

Part 4 was concerned with the participant's current social network. This section was similar to Part 2 including a question about larger community. The social network hierarchical mapping diagram was again employed here as an aid. This section also included a question regarding how given their network today participants envisioned their future social network.

Part 5, the reflections portion of the interview, borrowed heavily from a study for a dissertation by Breshears (2011). The first question in Part 5, was "How do you think the timing of your coming out made your life different from gays or lesbians who came out at an earlier age?" The second question, "What do you want other people to know about your life, your family, your friendships?" fell flat. In general, participants did not want to respond or could not think of how to respond to the question. I asked the third question in Part 5, "What advice would you give to others when they come out at mid- or later life?" verbatim in the first interview. Showing the strength and flexibility of the qualitative approach employed for this study, I was able to immediately revise the question to include "...or what lessons have you learned..." when the first interviewee was reluctant to answer the question. Finding that asking about "lessons learned" gained more positive results, I included this revised wording for the remainder of the interviews. The final interview question, asked if the participant had anything they wanted to add or say.

After initial introductions, I went over the nature and the purpose of the study with each participant, and reviewed the informed consent. I obtained the informed consent of each

participant before beginning the interview with them. Each interview began with the demographic survey. I thought it would be better to gather this information before a lengthy and likely emotionally exhausting interview. This strategy worked well; the survey turned out to be an opportunity to build rapport. Most, if not all, participants responded to one or more of the questions in the demographic survey with lengthy answers, rich in detail, that addressed questions outlined in the qualitative portion of the interview. The response rate to the questions in the demographic survey was near 100%. Only two participants refused to answer a question and it was the same question for both: annual income. No other participants refused to answer or objected to any of the questions in the demographic survey.

With the first few interviews, I tried to carefully follow the interview guide, proceeding with each question in order. With experience, I found the first question, “Please tell me about your background...” often led to a flowing conversation that covered many of the topics in the interview guide, with little or no prompting from me. Additionally, though I did not necessarily announce that I too came out later in life, this position made me more empathetic to the participants and I am sure factored into the rapport enjoyed in the interviews.

All of the interviews were conducted in person. Each interview was digitally recorded and later transcribed. The interviews were held at times convenient to the participants and at places where they felt comfortable. Nine interviews were conducted in the residences of the participants. Three interviews were conducted in a private room at the offices of a local non-profit agency that serves gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender communities, and two of the interviews were conducted in my home. The average interview lasted about an hour and a half (86 minutes to be exact). The shortest interview was completed in 38 minutes and the longest lasted 121 minutes. Despite its seeming brevity in comparison to the average length of the

interviews, the shortest interview was rich in detail and high in quality, largely due to the respondent's focused answers, as well as the easy rapport we shared.

### **3.4 Analysis**

Shortly after completing each interview, usually within hours, I would playback the audio to review the stories told and the feelings conveyed in the conversations. After each interview was transcribed, I read through them, correcting errors in the transcriptions. Once each transcript was prepared, I continued the analysis.

My analysis was informed by the Grounded Theory Method (GTM) as described by Strauss & Corbin (1990). As some changes in individuals' social networks that revolved around coming out later in life were expected, I deviated from GTM and used the interview guide to create an initial list of codes for the "open coding" phase. Utilizing NVivo 10 software, I completed the first round of coding of each interview, as they became available. I made at least three revisions to the code list as recurrent themes emerged including: coming out process; ageism; homophobia; sexual careers; religious careers; historical contexts; choosing to disclose or not; and disclosure and autonomy (see Appendix D for the final version of the code book).

Once the initial coding was completed, I performed axial coding. Strauss and Corbin (1990) describe "axial coding" as a process of rearranging data in a new way to make connections between categories based on conditions, contexts, actions, and outcomes. I created charts that listed the people that either now comprise or once comprised each participant's social network in terms of changes in relationships, conflicts and challenges, key factors, and outcomes. As I constructed these social network charts, I referenced the transcripts, and included illustrative quotes from the interviews as footnotes. Using the charts, the coded data, and the interview transcripts, I wrote a summary of each participant, essentially a case study of each.

Strauss & Corbin (1990) describe “selective coding” as the stage of analysis in which the researcher writes “the story.” They define “the story” as “a descriptive narrative of the central phenomenon of the study.” Through the process of coding/categorizing, charting, and summarization, a story line began to form. For the participants in this study, coming out later in life is marked by gaining and losing family, friends, and others within their individual social networks. Some of the action of gaining and losing is caused by events typical of the life course of most anyone: births, deaths, marriages, divorces, careers, retirement, and so on. The difference for participants in this study was this gaining and losing has occurred within the context of coming out later in life, a long process over time that continues to unfold for some. “Gaining and Losing” is the core category that describes the impact coming out at mid- or later had on individuals’ social networks. The concept of “Gaining and Losing” will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

## 4 PARTICIPANTS

In this chapter, I first present a detailed picture of the demographic characteristics of the sample. This is followed by a discussion of the historical times of participants' early lives. Finally, four case examples are presented that demonstrate the range of participants' experiences with coming out at mid- to later life and its impact on their social networks, specifically gaining and losing.

### 4.1 Social and Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

#### 4.1.1 *Age, Gender, Race, and Region of Birth/Childhood*

The study included fourteen participants. The average age of the participants was 70.4 years. The oldest study participant was 82 years old and the youngest was 58 years old. Six participants reported their gender as female and eight reported male.

Twelve participants identified their race as White or Caucasian. One participant identified himself as Black, and one participant identified herself as Native American. None were of Hispanic or Latino origin.

Geographic origins of the participants were fairly diverse. Six were born and raised in the Northeast region of the United States, five in the Southeast, and two in the Midwest. One participant was born and raised in Germany, but has lived in the U.S. all his adult life.

#### 4.1.2 *Marital Status and Household Configuration*

Current marital status of the study participants varied: three have never married; one is in a domestic partnership with a same sex partner; two are legally married to same sex partners; six were divorced from opposite sex partners, and one was widowed from a same sex spouse. The total duration (regardless of legal status) of the current relationships of the three



partnered/married participants was lengthy. The participant who was in a domestic partnership had been with her partner for thirty-two years. Of the legally married participants, one had been with his partner for 32 years overall, and the other had been with her spouse for 34 years overall.

The marital histories of most participants included unions with opposite sex partners. Eleven were once married and now divorced from opposite sex partners. Ten of these eleven have children (biological, step, adopted, and/or foster). Sadly, three participants have suffered the loss of one or more of their children and two of these participants have lost adult children.

Study participants' current living arrangements varied greatly. Eight of the fourteen participants lived by themselves. Two participants lived with a friend or roommate. Only three participants lived with a same sex spouse or domestic partner. One currently married participant's household includes at least one of her adult children, grandchildren, and foster children that she and her wife are raising. One participant lived with one of her adult children, and helps this daughter with child care.

#### ***4.1.3 Education and Income***

Overall the participants in the study were well educated (see Table 3.2): one graduated high school, six had undergraduate degrees, and seven had earned Master Degrees or Doctorates. Levels of annual income of the participants varied widely. One participant was unemployed, with no source of income at the time of the interview. Sources of income varied in type, as well as multiplicity, with some participants enjoying several sources of income.

Four individuals, including the oldest study participant, reported paid work or own business as a source of income. One participant works part-time providing domestic services and running errands for other older adults. One participant works as an independent consultant for the large company where he was once an executive. One was in the process of opening his own

business at the time of his interview. Finally, one participant works at a financial company he helped found.

#### ***4.1.4 Religious Affiliation***

Religious affiliations and beliefs varied widely within the group. Most of the study participants have adopted religious beliefs that differ greatly from the conservative traditions in which they were raised. Some participants are no longer affiliated with an organized religion at all. Six reported no current religious affiliation. Two reported membership or at least occasional attendance at a Protestant church. Two reported Unitarian Universalist as their current religious affiliation. One participant was Catholic. One participant described himself as spiritual. One participant described herself as an atheist, adding “It's much easier to tell someone, and it always has been, that I'm a lesbian than it has been to tell them I'm an atheist. That's one thing I never do say.”

#### ***4.1.5 Sexual Orientation***

Participants' reported sexual orientation fell into three general categories. The eight men in the study identified as gay males. However, one added a qualifying statement when asked about his sexual orientation, “There may be just a smattering of transgender in there, but I am mostly gay.” Four of the women in the study stated firmly that they were lesbian. The other two women in the study reported being bisexual, one of whom left the matter of sexual preference somewhat ambiguous. She reported being a “late-blooming lesbian, probably bisexual.” The other was more adamant that her sexual orientation was bisexual, but she went on to explain that she was “publically” a lesbian because many other people she knows or had encountered could not conceive of bisexuality. This reinforces the notion that there is a continuum of “outness.” Again, coming out is a process. Many in this study came out in gradual steps, from their own

awakening to disclosure to those important in their life. Being out is a matter of degree: one tells oneself, one tells a lover, one tells one's children, and so on. The decision to disclose or not disclose one's sexual orientation is often situational, a calculation of the risk of being accepted or rejected by others. One may have resolved their internal conflict to the point that they no longer live in fear of being "outed." Additionally, the specific instance noted here suggests it is more socially acceptable to identify as either strictly heterosexual or strictly homosexual than to claim a bisexual identity.

#### ***4.1.6 Age of Coming Out***

My findings suggest that most participants exist on a continuum of "outness." Further, as a long process with no clear beginning or end, coming out constitutes one of several trajectories that have shaped the life course of each participant. Although coming out is arguably a process, rather than a single event, each participant reported an age of coming out. Thus, in terms of the life course perspective, they marked a clear turning point in their personal histories.

For the sample, the youngest reported age of coming out was 39 years and the oldest was 69 years. The mean age of coming out for the sample ( $N=14$ ) was 48.3 years. Women ( $n=6$ ) in this study reported coming out ten years earlier than men ( $n=8$ ), age 42.5 versus age 52.6. This finding runs contrary to some other studies. For instance, Grov, Bimbi, Nanín, and Parsons (2006) found men aged 55+ had come out on average by 20.31 years, versus women 55+ who had come out by an average age of 24.11 years. Floyd and Bakeman (2006) found no significant differences in average ages of disclosure between men and women across three categories: disclosure to a non-parent, disclosure to mother, and disclosure to father. Like participants in Grov and colleagues 2006 study, participants in Floyd and Bakeman's study came out in their early 20's, less than half the average age of coming for participants in this study. From a life

course perspective, when compared to the previous research noted, my findings may suggest possible gendered differences in the age of coming out that are associated with coming out “off time.” In other words, is it possible that as men and women age along the path of the normative/prescriptive life course (education, career, marriage, pro-creation, retirement) that their paths diverge enough to create an actual difference in the timing of coming out later in life? In contrast to the aforementioned studies, a larger study ( $N = 1260$ ) of identity development of gay, lesbian, and bisexual adults by Calzo and colleagues (2011) identified a subsample of 70 participants as “late profile.” This group came out at a mean age of 43.18 years. They found that the women in this group may have come out earlier than the men, and suggested that this might indicate a greater antipathy in society towards gay men, than lesbians.

Despite reporting an actual age of coming out, most participants have experienced coming out as a lengthy process, with disclosure taking place as a gradual unfolding in small, and not necessarily linear steps/stages overtime. For the majority of respondents, the experience of coming out could not be reduced to a single “before/after” event. Indeed, even considering coming out as a process, the starting point of coming out for any given participant is difficult to pinpoint. Did the process begin as a child with a same-sex attraction or experience? Did it begin when one misread cues from another of the same sex and thus inadvertently revealed herself? Did it begin with one’s first long-term, but held secret, same-sex relationship? For participants in this study, any given disclosure (or exposure) did not necessarily equal coming out. Further, any given disclosure (or exposure) did not necessarily have a direct or immediate impact on participant’s social networks. Arguably, certain such incidents may have propelled or informed the internal process for some participants, moving them further along the trajectory of the coming out process. For example, although Luke disclosed his homosexual tendencies to a

military psychologist, other than a temporary deferment from the draft, Luke's confession did not have a direct impact on his social network. His life continued as it was. Further as Luke explained this incident to me, it was out of a sense of honesty that he disclosed his homosexual feelings, feelings which at that time in his life, he did not think represented his true self.

Considerations of temporality, "When did it begin?"; "When did it end?"; What was life like before? and "What was life like after?" suggest that there is some clear definition of "out", or further, that there is some point in the process that once crossed, you are "out" (again participants reported an actual age of coming out). Surely, if one never disclosed, by word or action, to any other person their homosexuality, they would never be "out." However, if they told some people but did not tell everybody, or at least everyone they thought to be of some consequence in their life, would they not still be "out"?

The threshold event in the process of coming out may be when one decides to drop any pretenses of heterosexuality, and live life openly as the gay man or lesbian woman they know themselves to be. However, this simple definition has not been the experience of most of the participants in this study. Most of the participants in this study have come out gradually, existing at some point on a continuum of "outness" as they negotiate their social world.

In certain situations and with certain relations, some participants have chosen to keep their sexual identity to themselves for a variety of reasons. Such choices are often double-edged swords, preserving a relationship at the expense of the possibility of moving that relationship to a new and different place, perhaps to a much deeper plane than its current level. However, the possibility that disclosure of one's true sexual identity will lead to a more fulfilling relationship is not guaranteed. At one or more times in their lives, most of the study participants found themselves in situations where the potential of gaining or losing important personal relationships

if they disclosed their sexual identity had to be evaluated. At any stage of life, social support is important, if not critical to one's well-being. Arguably, as one moves from mid-life into old age the consequences of losing social support are accentuated. Thus, as one grows older, the gravity of decisions to disclose or not disclose one's sexual orientation may increase.

#### **4.2 Historical Context (location in time, place, and social structure):**

Study participants represent two different cohorts: the Silent Generation ( $n = 9$ ) and Baby Boomers ( $n = 5$ ) (see Pew Research Center, 2015 for definition of these terms). Despite being members of two distinct historical cohorts, effects associated with prevalent negative attitudes and beliefs toward homosexuality that existed within society during both these eras had the same net impact on the lives of all but one of the study participants. Arguably, the machinations of oppression may have varied over the course of each of these periods, as well as between the two, but again the overall net effect was similar (see Shankle and colleagues, 2003, pp. 163-164 for a discussion of cohort effects among older lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender older adults).

As all participants came out in (only one) or after 1975, with the average year of coming out being 1991, we might also view this group of participants as members of a single smaller cohort, that is those who came out "post-Stonewall" i.e. post-Gay Liberation. Indeed, a majority came out after the devastation caused by HIV/AIDS before treatments to manage the virus/disease were available. This distinction separates most study participants, particularly the gay males, from those of their same age who came out earlier in life, and so may impact their sense of community. Participant Luke explained his feelings of loss,

In some sense, I missed a lot, but yeah, woulda, coulda, shoulda, you know? I do think about that a fair amount. There are times when I just realize that important

things [the early days of the AIDS epidemic] were going on while I was in a self-imposed oblivion...

Thus certain historical events and an individual's particular timing of coming out may intersect to generate unique sub-cohorts of individuals.

Most study participants felt same sex attractions when they were children, and they also felt the need to hide or suppress such desires due to prevalent attitudes in society. These early decisions plotted the course of their individual lives shaping its trajectories for decades of their adult life. Simply, heterosexuality was the only normative option during these eras. Other sexual identities were considered mental illness, deviant, and/or criminal. The idea of being homosexual as a socially acceptable identity was unknown during these times. Oppression and persecution of homosexuals was systemic and virtually unquestioned. Frank noted the differences between the world in which he grew up and the world today, "You know at that time there was not, this was 1963, '64, there was no such thing as a gay identity. I mean it was two totally different worlds. One hundred eighty degrees from where we are today." Not surprisingly, the prevailing attitudes in society shaped participants' thinking, as well as their actions regarding themselves, their roles in society, and their social networks.

Several participants noted that when they were children the subject of sexuality in general was rarely, if ever, discussed at home or in school. The lack of information about sex left some participants ignorant and naïve as to the meaning of their own sexual feelings. Michael explained the state of sex education when he was young:

We didn't even have word for gay and there was absolutely no sex education. I mean they try to keep you from knowing where babies came from for as long as possible. Under those conditions, it was a while before I knew that I was different.

I mean, I always knew that I was attracted to males. I just thought that all males were attracted to males since it was never discussed.

Matthew who was raised Catholic had a similar experience of the lack of sex education when he was a boy, as he explained it:

Growing up sex was never mentioned. Even though it happened a lot, sex was never mentioned. Frankly my parents, because they were older, I thought were tired. That's just the nature of the beast. Growing up when I reached puberty and was having issues with erections and nocturnal emissions no one explained that to me. The good nuns did not explain it to you. There was no internet.

With the lack of discussion of sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular, participants found themselves isolated, left to struggle with their feelings internally. Mary expressed how her life might have been different had she been able to talk with someone about her attraction to other girls, "I think having had someone to help me go through that or explore it [homosexuality], at least intellectually and emotionally if not, at least have heard of it in some positive manner other than silence that permeated everything."

Most participants noted that they were aware of their same-sex attraction at a young age, but also sensed such feelings were somehow wrong. Luke spoke of his feelings for other boys which were tempered by his religious upbringing, "I was aware of my attraction to boys, but I understood myself [to be heterosexual] because of the teachings of my church." Likewise, John had a similar experience. Speaking of his attraction to other males, John said, "It [same-sex attraction] was always there, but I grew up Catholic."

Study participants lacked positive examples of homosexual individuals to model themselves after when they were growing up. Several participants noted the negative stereotypes



of homosexuals prevalent in society when they were young. John talked about how he did not relate with such characterizations:

Gay, when I was a teenager, was a fruit, a faggot, somebody dressed up in ridiculous clothing with ridiculous manners. Well, that wasn't me, so therefore, I wasn't gay, or so on. The ability and the environment that I grew up in to be gay, to come out as gay, and so on, you might as well have jumped off a bridge or something like that. It was just not, it [was] not an option, at least not an option that I saw.

John internalized society's negative characterizations of gay men. John could not be gay, because to be gay was to be less than masculine, a "fruit", or to be lecherous deviant, a "faggot".

David talked of how he has always "passed" because prevailing attitudes linked male homosexuality with notions of a lack of masculinity. As David explained,

I've never been considered [gay]—because I can play sports, and I was halfway decent, I was never effeminate. I was never chastised. I was never demonized—or whatever you wanna say it. I didn't have the issues that a lot of my friends have. Just, it was right for me.

Though aware of their homosexual feelings, most of the study participants felt compelled to conform to the prescribed heterosexual life course: education, career, marriage, and children. Most struggled with their self-knowledge and society's prescribed roles. James had some homosexual experiences as a teenager, but wrote it off as "experimenting." He married his first wife as soon as he finished college. After divorcing her, James married again,

I got married right outta college, to my high school sweetheart. That marriage didn't last. That only lasted six years. Then I got remarried. I don't know what I

was thinking, but I did. There was just a lot of pressure, in those days. You didn't realize. I had had my first homosexual experience when I was like 14, but you pass it off as experimenting. Your hormones are running wild. The girl down the street won't give you the time of day, but the guy will. You don't realize. Then, there's so much pressure about, "oh! you have to get married, you have to have kids, you've gotta—blah, blah, blah." That's all I ever heard. You do it, and you or, at least, I did, I suppressed those feelings a lot. They were always there. They were always there. It just drove me crazy, for years. Finally, I just said, "This is ridiculous. No. This isn't what I want."

Like James, after his first marriage failed and despite his awareness of his true sexuality, David married a second time. He too felt the pressure to conform to societal mores. However, as David explained it, he has no regrets,

In any event...I got married again. I knew I was gay, but I was supposed to get married because you get married. You have three kids or two kids, whatever, and live in a house with a two-car garage and have a station wagon and a sedan or whatever. That's what you're supposed to do. Not knowing, I did that. I'll be honest with you. I found a good woman and I have two great kids. Knowing the outcome, I'd do it again.

Unlike most participants who felt they had to conform to societal norms, Alice was forced into marriage by her parents shortly after she finished high school. Alice thinks her parents probably thought or feared she was a lesbian. As Alice told me, "I think they were just suspicious of me. They decided I was going to get married, and they basically picked him out." To preserve her personal integrity, Alice told her soon-to-be husband that she was a lesbian.

Surprisingly, he wanted to marry her anyway and Alice felt compelled to marry him because she thought she had no other options. The pain of these memories still follows her,

I lived in a small town and I did not have access to transportation. My parents were overbearing and controlling. My sister won a scholarship to [art school in a large city], and they would not let her take it because that would have been too far away... Too far away. I didn't even try for it, although I wanted to do that too... I didn't have any money. I didn't have a way out. [Even now] I hate driving through small towns. I go through a small town; I get claustrophobic. I think, "Oh, my God, how many people are in here that [endured what I endured?]."

Like David, and despite her extreme dislike for her ex-husband, Alice has no regrets. Her marriage brought her five children, "I was married for seventeen years and had five children. I wanted the children, that was one thing, because I always wanted to be a mother. I knew I could be a better mother than I had, and I was."

Frank's experience was somewhat atypical. From a young age, he was always keenly aware of his same-sex attractions, but he never felt conflicted about them. Despite this self-awareness, he never doubted that he would marry a woman, "Now when I went to seminary, my sexuality was not an issue. I pretty much expected I would get married. I had these feelings for, these fantasies about [other men] but that was it." Thus, Frank remained fluid in his sexuality. In seminary school, he had an affair with another man, but he also enjoyed dating women,

My sexuality had absolutely nothing to do at the time, even though while I was in seminary I had this short affair [with another man], actually, for about a year and a half. I mean I knew I was gay, or at least I knew I was more attracted to the

male, and yet I enjoyed dating women. For whatever it's worth, I had tremendous fortune to always date very good-looking girls.

The struggle to conform and the knowledge that one did not, presented a dilemma that marked the early lives of most participants. Religious beliefs often played a role in how participants saw themselves. Luke noted how religious teachings inhibited his personal development,

...if I could, have freed myself from my religious understanding as it pertained to [homosexuality] if I had [had] some model, to move out of my church-developed clamp on my instincts, with the understanding that they were not a natural part of me. If I could have integrated them [my homosexual feelings] into myself, I would have had a much more integrated life.

Given the historical context, it is not surprising that before beginning the coming out process, some participants lived in denial of their homosexual identity while having occasional same-sex relations. They saw their homosexual activity as something they did, not their core identity. For example, Luke had some same-sex experiences as a teenager/young man. At that time, he did not think these encounters were representative of his true self noting, "...my sexual attraction to men, and that I had acted on it a few times, but that I understood it not to be an intrinsic part of myself ..." Luke went on to explain that he thought of himself as, "...truly straight, but tempted to be involved with men." Likewise, William who was married and had four children sometimes engaged in sex with other men when traveling on business:

I would say life was pretty routine for me. I really never thought that I was gay, although I traveled a fair amount in my job, and occasionally I would have liaisons with other men. I thought, "well, that's just something I did"...I actually

related it to drinking cuz I used to drink heavily...I never really thought that I was actually gay until maybe I was into my 40s, [by then] two of the children were pretty grown. Two were still at home. Then I began to have more gay activity.

In summary, the participants came of age in times when there was no safe place in society for homosexuals. Most participants suffered for years as they struggled to reconcile their true identity with the expectations placed upon them at every level of their individual social worlds.

### **4.3 Case Examples**

I chose the four case examples presented here for the complexity of personal histories and coming out experiences they represent, including the psycho-social costs of not disclosing one's sexual orientation. These selected cases exemplify a variety of factors influential to the coming out process later in life and its impact on social networks of study participants. These examples represent both conventional and unconventional thinking of what it means to be out. Further, the cases here illustrate gaining and losing, a phenomena experienced by all participants in a variety of ways. In these cases, gaining and losing is an action that parallels, informs, and is informed by the process of coming out later in life. A process that is ongoing for most of the participants in this study.

#### ***4.3.1 Case Example 1: Renee: Borderline Relationships***

Renee is a White female. She is 58 years old. Renee came out at age 40. She currently lives by herself. Privately Renee identifies as bisexual, but as she put it, "Publically, I say lesbian." She employs this protective strategy to avoid discrimination and exclusion by others. Renee recently retired and moved from a smaller Southeastern city to a large Southeast metropolitan area.

Renee grew up in a smaller Southeastern city. She has two sisters, both younger and both still living. Renee's mother has passed away, but her father is still living. Renee's parents were members of a fundamentalist denomination and she was raised in its traditions. As a child, Renee was an active member of the church. Growing up her friends consisted of her sisters and the children of other church members. Playing with non-member children was discouraged. Despite her very conservative upbringing, Renee is now a member of the much more liberal Unitarian Universalist Church.

After high school, Renee attended a religious college and planned to be a missionary. In her second year at college, Renee fell in love with a woman, her roommate, and they had a romantic affair. At this time, her religious beliefs began to change dramatically. She became very interested in atheism. In an attempt to escape her conflicted sexual feelings, as well as doubts about her religious beliefs, Renee changed her career plans, and transferred to a state university to study engineering. Renee was in denial about her affair with her roommate, she thought, "Well, the only reason I'm in this relationship is not for emotional reasons but for sexual reasons. I'll get down there [the state university]. There'll be lots of men. I'll date men, and everything will be better." Renee dated men in college, but remained a virgin. She went on to graduate, but remained confused about both her sexual feelings and her religious beliefs. Although Renee considered herself an atheist or at least agnostic, she tried to stay in the church in which she was raised by regularly attending Sunday and Wednesday services, and teaching Sunday school.

Renee went through some stormy years from young adulthood to middle age as she struggled to reconcile her public and private selves. After many years, Renee began to come to terms with sexual identity at least internally. She began to lead an active though discrete gay life, "I did date women. I did meet and I dated women. I found the gay bar. That was all there was...I

met my second girlfriend..." This newfound relationship did not go well. Then she met a man and she married him because she wanted "a stable home life." They were married for six and a half years and separated when Renee found another lesbian lover. Then Renee met another man, who she fell "madly in love with." This passionate relationship was short-lived and when he dumped Renee she had a very emotional reaction:

It broke my heart, and so I wanted to kill myself again, but I wasn't as far as—I wasn't nowhere close...I wound up havin' to go through, basically, months of recovery, and as part of that process, I realized, "Hey, I think the word for somebody like me is bisexual. I think I'm pretty proud of being this way. I think I'm gonna come out," so that's what I did.

Renee came out and as she put it, "went public." She told her family, then her boss, she marched in the Pride parade in her town, and she was interviewed for a local news program.

Renee's father did not speak to her for six months after she came out, and now 18 years later she believes he still is not reconciled to the fact that she is bisexual:

He never did. He never did get—he never did get better. He started talkin' to me cuz he had to, and that wasn't gonna last. With mother—basically, she was—she was kinda accepting me. He was so attached to my mother that he couldn't—I think he really did wanna disown me and have nothing more to do with me.

Renee's relationships with her sisters are not very close either due to their lack of understanding and acceptance of Renee for who she is,

They all remained very strong members of the [very conservative protestant denomination] and migrated over the years from being Democrats to being Republicans. They are very conservative. Both families are very conservative.

They think that I am horrible. Both sisters think that being gay is a choice and that it's the wrong choice.

Despite her differences with her father and sisters, Renee placed them in the “inner circle” (ring 1, those people most important in one’s life) of the social network mapping diagram used in the interviews. However, she qualified her rating of her father and one sister as “on the line” between rings 1 and 2 of the social network mapping diagram (those most important in one’s life and those close but not as important). Her borderline assessment of these relations marks a loss in her social network.

Renee leads an active social life, centered around her church and two dance clubs, one of which is gay-oriented. Her social activity has netted her many friends. However, for the most part, in her mind, Renee does not feel as close to these people as she expects. She attributes the lack of depth in her social relationships to her outgoing personality, “I’m an extrovert, so what that means is I have a lot of casual friends...and a lot of my friends—I know it—they’re kind of superficial friendships...”

In addition to her club and church memberships, Renee is one in a small group of close friends that have helped each other work on each other’s houses over the years. Two of these friends are men who live in the city she just left, and the other is a woman that lives in her new city. She talked about the potential support these friendships offer, “I’ve got a female friend here that’s like that, so I’m workin’ on her house. I think that when the time comes for her to work on my house, she’ll help me.”

Renee recently moved from one state to another. Some of her dance club friends live in her new city. Renee includes people in her dance clubs and church in all three rings of her social network. Nevertheless, Renee stated that she is finding it difficult to become fully integrated in



her new hometown because she does not feel socially connected in her new church. Thus, as Renee establishes herself in her new hometown, her social network continues to transform.

#### **4.3.2 Case Example 2: Michael: A Divided Life**

Michael is a White male. He is single, unemployed, and lives with a roommate. He identifies as a gay male. Michael is 59 years old and he came out at age 43. However, with the exception of his only sibling, a sister, he has chosen to not come out to his family, friends from his childhood, or people back in his hometown. As he put it, “I was and still am very selective on who I come out to.”

Michael’s father has passed away, but his mother is still living. Michael says that he never felt “particularly close” to his parents, noting that they were never intimate or affectionate with each other or their children.

Michael was raised in the Methodist church. He describes his hometown as a “very small town and extremely conservative.” Michael’s parents were not very religious, “there was no prayer at meals or Bible-thumping in the house.” However, Michael felt the overall environment of his hometown was repressive because of fundamentalist views held by others in the community. Though Michael no longer claims any religious affiliation, he is very involved with a spiritually-oriented gay group, he sees himself as psychic, and he is very interested in the clairvoyant. Many of his closest friends are also involved with the spiritually-oriented gay group to which he belongs.

Michael knew he was attracted to other males when he was very young, age 3. He struggled with his sexual feelings that he believed were morally wrong up until the time that he came out. Michael was socially isolated by his internalized homophobia. He had no one, neither friends or family, to whom he felt really close, as he put it, “Before I came out...you see, nobody

got very close to me because I had the cardboard heterosexual fake person that I was holding between me and everybody. There was nobody really, really close to me.” Hoping to become straight, the summer before Michael went to college he joined the Mormons. He explained, “I was convinced I was going to hell if I didn’t figure out how to be straight. The summer before I went to college, I got ‘Mormonized.’” Michael was very active in the Mormon Church throughout his college years, but in the end his association with the church did nothing to help him change his sexual identity.

A turning point in Michael’s coming out process occurred around age 40 when at his then new place of work he finally came into frequent social contact with other gay men. Michael explained how he began to socialize with the gay men at his workplace, “They would have parties and I would go. It was [a] mixed party. You didn’t have to declare your orientation...I got very relaxed and realized these aren’t the people who are going to hurt me.” In this newfound social space, Michael became accepting of other gay men, as well as his own sexuality. Michael also found that he was finally accepted and valued for who he truly was,

I realized it was okay for me to be who I was, and I had been totally surrounded by gay people for two years and I really started liking them. I honestly wanted to be their friend, and I realized this is my first opportunity in life to be friends with people who know everything about me and celebrate who I am. They’re my friends because of who I am, not just tolerating who I am.

Thus, Michael’s social world came into alignment with his internal reality. He finally found himself in a place where he could be himself without fear, “I wanted to thrive, celebrate with these like-minded people. That’s why I came out.” After coming out to a friend at work, his

social network changed dramatically in a short period of time, as Michael put it, “I completely switched my universe of friends.” Since coming out Michael has gained several very close friends, most, if not all, through spiritually-oriented gay groups. The gay groups to which Michael belongs also form his greater social network.

Michael has not come out to his mother. He believes that she (and his extended family) have no idea that he is gay. Michael is afraid that if he comes out to people from his hometown, his mother would be harassed by them. He explained, “I mean in the hometown where I grew up, those people would be bothering my mother. That would make her life a living hell. She’s almost 89. She doesn’t need to go through that.” Coming out to his mother is further complicated by the fact that his sister is terminally ill, “It would cause her [my mother] a great upset and trouble. And this close to the end of her life, why put her through that? She’s already going through hell watching my sister slowly die.”

Michael’s family and people he knew growing up exist at the periphery of his social world. He has either obligatory contact, such as holiday visits, with them, or no contact at all. He has lost or broken contact with the friends he had in the Mormon church, mostly because he has come out, “I had to just withdraw from them. After college, everybody scattered. That was good because I can’t be who they want me to be either.” Michael’s choice to selectively disclose his identity, limits the most important people in his social network to those outside his family of origin. However by choosing to live a gay life, he has gained one key person in his life, himself.

### ***4.3.3 Case Example 3: Matthew: Family Lost and Family Found***

Matthew is a White male, age 65 who came out at age 51. Matthew is retired. He has never been married and currently lives by himself. He was the youngest of eight children raised in a Catholic family. Matthew attended Catholic high school, working and paying the tuition

himself. Ironically, he “lost” his Catholicism while attending Catholic college. Now, Matthew does not claim any religious affiliation.

Matthew had his first sexual experience with a neighbor boy when he was around thirteen. He dated girls/women in high school, college, and up to around age 30. While he was dating and having sex with women, he was also having sex with men on the “DL” (down low). As Matthew’s friends graduated from college and married, he faced increasing pressure from his family to get married as well. However, his conscience would not allow it:

Everything I projected towards following the path [marriage, kids, career]. There was always something in the back of my mind that said, “No, this is not right. This just is not right. I cannot commit to being with this person when I know full well I have an attraction to men. I can’t explain it. I’ve been told I’m going to hell because I’m doing it. I will continue to do it.”

At age 25, Matthew was still single and took on (or was charged with) the responsibility for taking care of his ailing mother both financially and emotionally. He felt frustrated. His closeted homosexuality, only further fueled his frustration:

I’m paying the bills and I had a dead end job and I’m frustrated because I—my frustration in retrospect centers on the fact that I was not who I [wanted to be]—I could not tell people how I felt. The structure was not there. The tools were not there. Nothing was there.

With no one to talk to about his problems, Matthew remained closeted and in denial. He shared his way of thinking about himself at that time:

I could not be [gay]. My culture said, “No, you cannot be.” The fact that you like your dick sucked, that was just—sexual gratification. I would say five Our

Father's and ten Hail Mary's and that would be okay... I was not religious but I rationalized the sexual activity, what the hell, if push came to shove I could say an Act of Perfect Contrition and slip into heaven. It's amazing the games that your mind will play.

Around his mid-thirties, the AIDS crisis broke and Matthew went into a deep depression. In his words: "...well in my 30s this was about the same time of the AIDS crisis which also scared me shitless. Every time you had sex, 'am I going to get HIV?' I went into a deep depression in mid-30s." In an attempt to end his depression and to shift some the burden of care for his mother to his siblings, Matthew moved a few hundred miles from his hometown. It did not work, but it did relieve some of the pressure he felt from his family to get married.

Matthew remained depressed. He continued hiding his sexual identity. As he explained, "Even though I had a nice job, good income, I was still depressed. I mean I had a social network of heteronormative [friends], but I had no gay friends." Matthew remained socially isolated, he did not feel close to any of his family or friends, as he put it "I wouldn't let anybody be close to me... [I kept people] at a distance, emotionally and psychologically. I had this space around me and by God you could not come into that space."

The emergence of the internet as a vehicle for social interaction gave Matthew a new and better way to meet men. Around age 40, he met someone online who he really liked and this led to his first truly romantic relationship with another man:

Met someone online. We dated. We had fun together...It was nice. It was nice in the sense that I finally could be with somebody and for some brief instant besides five minutes have an enjoyable time. An enjoyable time socially, other than in the bed.

Matthew moved again, this time to a large Southeastern city with a highly visible gay community. Matthew met other gay men. He attended meetings of gay-oriented groups, including a support group designed to socialize men into gay life. He met in his words, the “love of my life”. They were together romantically for six years, and they have remained close friends since breaking up. Matthew and his lover attended counseling. The counselor advised Matthew, that he would never have healthy relationships if he continued hold in his anger and resentment. Matthew began to reconcile with his family members by writing many of them letters apologizing for any of his behavior that might have hurt them in anyway. As he reconnected with family, he remained mute on the subject of his sexuality. However, his use of social media such as Facebook, left him increasingly at risk of exposure. He finally realized “this is stupid” and on a particular National Coming Out Day he came out by writing letters to some 75-80 family members. It was a huge risk, even though many had probably already figured out that Matthew was gay. He explained, “When I sent the letters out, even though I knew full well intellectually that the people knew their uncle, cousin, brother was gay, it had never been confirmed. My action was a confirmation and a celebration.” Surprisingly for Matthew, his family supported him. Thus, by disclosing his sexual identity, Matthew gained the family he had lost due to hiding his true self. He is now connected with his family in a meaningful way, rather than a merely obligatory way.

Matthew now has many people in his life to whom he feels very close. These include his family and many gay friends. His social isolation and depression are behind him. He is a member of many gay groups including a dance club and a group for older gay men. Finally, and most importantly, by coming out Matthew gained himself, as he explained it, “It was like in order to

be me fully in all aspects of me, I had to be honest and up front. There's no denial, there's no illusions, there's not equivocation, there's no evasion..."

#### **4.3.4 Case Example 4: Theresa: Return to the Closet**

Theresa is a White female, 82 years old, who came out at age 42. She identifies as a lesbian. Theresa currently lives by herself in a senior living apartment building. Due to her high energy level, as well as a need to help make ends meet, Theresa still works part time.

Theresa was an only child. She was raised by her biological mother and her step-father. During her childhood, Theresa's parents moved several times and as a result, Theresa never was able to maintain friendships.

Theresa was married to a man for 14 years. They separated and divorced when Theresa fell in love with a woman. She has been married to two same-sex partners, though not legally, they had commitment ceremonies. One of her former same-sex spouses is now deceased.

Theresa had her daughter out of wedlock. When she married her husband, he adopted her daughter. Theresa and her husband had two sons. One son is deceased. The other son has not spoken to Theresa for fifteen or sixteen years. After he married a Christian fundamentalist and his wife became pregnant, they broke contact with Theresa. This break in relations occurred even though prior to the marriage they all did things together and enjoyed what seemed to be a good relationship. When I asked Theresa why she is estranged from her son, she said, "Because, I'm gay." Sadly, her son's daughter is Theresa's only biological grandchild and she has no contact with her.

Theresa has a "very, very close" relationship with her daughter. She told me they "talk every day." Theresa's daughter and her son-in-law are in their sixties. Her daughter has no biological children, but her husband has children, grandchildren, and at least one great-

grandchild. Theresa's daughter and son-in-law are not in as good of health as Theresa. Over the years, Theresa has provided them some material support, including helping one of the grandchildren buy a car.

Theresa has many friends. She made many of her friends when she was active in the gay-lesbian country music scene. Theresa talked of losses and resultant changes in her social network:

What is so strange is that since I've moved in here, I know everybody's getting older, you separate and stuff. Somebody asked me, "Well, do you still keep in touch with your gay friends?" I said, "Well, to tell you the truth, the only people that contact me are the guys."

She attributes the number of her friendships that have lasted to differences in age, they are much younger, "It's just the advantage that I have is most of these friends from country are at least 15, 20 years younger than me." However, she noted that they too are getting older, "Now they're getting to the point where they don't go out as much." Theresa talked about the toll time is taking on some of her friendships. One younger gay male friend who used to visit Theresa often, died unexpectedly of cancer. Theresa was "very, very close to" another male friend who had lost his partner. He used to call her once a month, and they would go out. Then he apparently started dating again, and now he does not call Theresa as often as he used to call.

Despite her ties to the gay-lesbian country music scene, Theresa finds that the social world offered by it is not the same for her anymore. Recently, for her birthday, a friend took Theresa to a club they used to frequent,

We went. I just stood there looking, and I thought, "I don't care about this anymore. It's not like it once was." When we first started it over at [gay country



bar], everybody wore cowboy hats and boots, and it was just fun. Everybody dressed up in—everybody danced with whoever. It doesn't feel that way anymore. I just stood there and watched them dance. I thought, "I don't care whether I come here or not."

Theresa's recounting of this incident, illustrates that gaining and losing can encompass community along with the times and places that define it.

Theresa is very active. She still works part-time. She cleans some of the other building residents' apartments. She transports other residents to medical appointments and shopping. In addition to paid work, Theresa is active in the resident council of her apartment building. Theresa is very committed to helping others. For years she volunteered at her church in a program to help the homeless. Now, on her own, Theresa continues that work, she makes "goodie bags" that contain some food, water, toiletries, and clothing (beanie hats, gloves, t-shirts, and so on). Theresa keeps some of these bags in her car, and when she is out driving she passes the bags out to homeless people she encounters. She also has a friend that comes to visit her from time to time that enjoys helping her distribute her "goodie bags."

Before moving to her current residence, Theresa lived an openly gay life. Now, she guards her lesbian identity, because she fears rejection by other residents. Speaking of her relations with other residents, Theresa explained her current situation and her reasons for not being as out as she once was:

I have one very close friend [here], but she still doesn't know about me. The only ones that know about me are ones that have sons that are gay. We don't talk about it, but they know. One of those kind of things...I used to drive my little pickup truck to Gay Pride and take everybody and all that. Well, of course, I'm not doing

any of that anymore... They're old up here. You know what I'm saying? They might probably distance themselves from me. The people here are fun, and you have a good time. Everything is good... I just find no reason whatsoever to tell anybody because I mean, I haven't lived with anybody. I've been here ten years.

#### **4.4 The Core Category: Gaining and Losing**

The life stories presented above reveal that coming out can be conditional, that the decision to disclose or not disclose is often mediated by circumstances. These case studies are united by the common theme of gaining and losing. Coming out later (or not coming out, as the case may be) in life has shaped the social networks of study participants and continues to shape their lives in ways that are often not predictable or certain. In the next chapter, the concept of gaining and losing is discussed in more detail.

## 5 GAINING and LOSING

First, in this chapter, the concept of gaining and losing as it relates to coming out later in life is presented. This is followed by a listing and discussion of some of the key factors that influence gaining and losing.

### 5.1 Gaining and Losing

Gaining and losing is an individualized process that transpires across time in relation to one's self and others. The process of gaining and losing shapes the evolution of one's social network and one's place within it. Study participants have realized gains and suffered losses in their individual social networks. Some of these gains and losses are typical of the life course (Altman, 1999; Connidis, 2010; Settersten, 2003). Over time, family members, friends, and acquaintances move in and out of people's lives for a variety of reasons including material and socio-emotional needs, mutual interests, proximity, solidarity/conflict, sickness, and death. Study participant James described the evolution of one's social network:

...people come and go in your life, depending on what you are doing, whether it's a club, or work, or something like that, or even church. I had many friends growing up, in church. I was president of my youth organization at church. When I left there, boom! never heard from these people again!

Thus, there is an ebb and flow in the composition of one's social network. Over the life course, this dynamic aspect of an individual's convoy affects the availability of social support to an individual. Study participants also have experienced gains and losses in their individual social networks that are attributable to coming out later in life. These changes often occurred within a context of discovering social communities that were either previously unknown to the participants or which they had carefully avoided.

In relation to one's self, gaining and losing can refer to the sense of self as fragmented or integrated, the integrated self being the authentic or true self and the fragmented self being an inauthentic or false self. For many years, most participants suffered due to the incongruence of their hidden homosexual/bisexual feelings and their public heterosexual personas. As Goffman (1959) noted, one may succeed in presenting themselves to others as something they are not, but then "not completely believe that he deserves the valuation of self which he asks for..." Thus presentation of a public self that does not reflect one's inner reality will not deliver its creator the benefit originally sought or imagined.

Being one's "true self" was the ultimate gain for the study participants and a theme they repeated. As Frank put it, "Know thy self. Be true to yourself. You've got to have that relationship with yourself." Mary echoed these sentiments, and talked of how her life changed when she finally followed this advice:

Just the old adage, "to thine own self be true". Until I learned to be true to myself and who I was, I wasn't happy. If the universe intended you to be straight, then be it. If it intended you to be gay, be it. If it intended you to be bi, then go for it. Just don't get hung up on what the world says you're supposed to be.

Likewise, when I asked Luke about what he would want others to know about his life, he repeated the theme of being true to oneself in terms of its possibility, "I want other people to know it is possible and good and important to live out one's identity as fully as possible." A little later in his interview Luke explained the potential for gains and losses that being true to oneself might bring:

That it [coming out] can be terrifying, that there will be loss associated with it, that—and part of that loss will be a loss of connection with people. Conversely,

that it can be extraordinarily important and liberating and joyous, even though that may not seem to be the picture at the front end of it. That's a joy, and the freedom to express that joy may involve some hard work.

In relation to others, gaining and losing can refer to the quantity and quality of one's relationships. Most participants maintained at least some key personal relationships through the coming out process. In some cases, relationships may have continued, but roles changed, such as, an ex-spouse becomes a best friend. For example, John and his second ex-wife are "still best friends...we do things all the time. We do yoga on Saturday, among other things." Likewise, Luke and his ex-wife remain good friends. As Luke laughingly explained, "I mean, we buy symphony tickets together...". The quality of one's relationships can also change when one comes out either improving, as with Matthew and his family (see Chapter 4) or declining, as with Renee and her father and sisters (see Chapter 4). Coming out has caused some study participants to lose key relationships altogether, and these losses may remain quite painful, for example, Theresa's loss of her son when he married and his wife became pregnant (see Chapter 4).

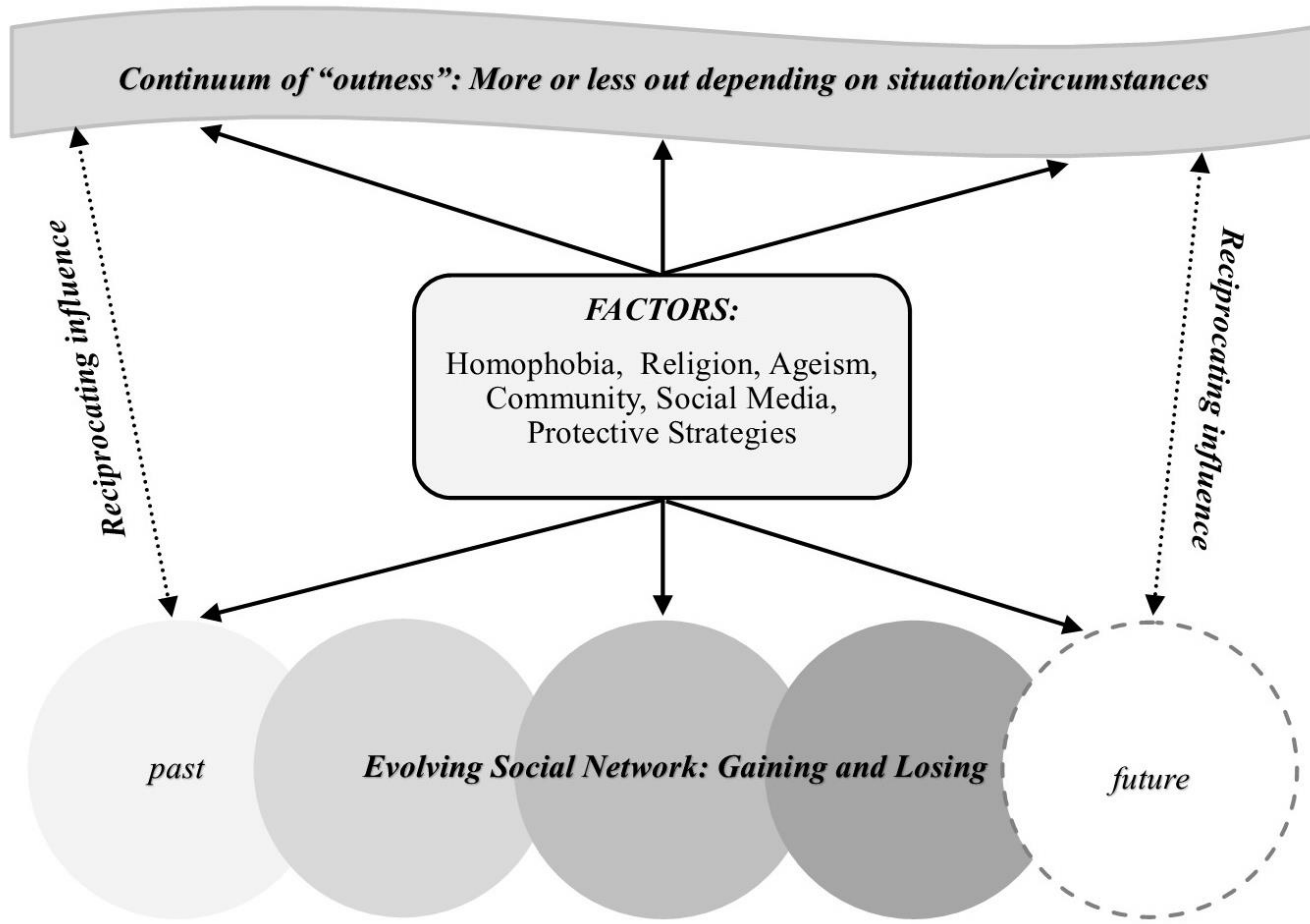
After beginning the coming out process, most study participants expanded their social network in some way. Often they became involved in the gay community through one or more avenues including support groups, spiritually-oriented groups, activist organizations, social clubs, and online chat/dating websites.

Most anyone's social network changes over time. However, for the study participants at least some of these changing relations revolved around their decision to disclose (or not disclose) their true sexual identity. In essence, the coming out process and the evolution of one's social network are two of several trajectories that shapes/shaped the life course of study participants. Each influences the other. Being "more out" may lead to gaining some new relationships, while

losing or changing the quality of some existing relationships. Being “less out” may serve to maintain some existing relations (gaining or at least not losing certain relationships). The decision to disclose or not disclose may be calculated on its anticipated cost in terms of social relationships and/or expenditure of personal effort and energy. However, by remaining less out or returning to the closet, the opportunity to form new or renegotiate existing, and arguably, more authentic relationships may be lost. The case examples of both Michael and Theresa (see Chapter 4) illustrate this point. Michael is socially distanced from his family and childhood friends by his decision to not disclose his sexuality to them. Fearing discrimination from her neighbors, Theresa has returned to the closet, and so, is unable to freely express herself and her emotions with her neighbors.

Figure 5.1 illustrates the relationship between the coming out process and the evolution of an individual’s social network, both of which are shaped by factors that influence gaining and losing. Following the diagram is a discussion of factors that affect gaining and losing, as well as the coming out process.

Figure 5.1 Evolving Social Network: Gaining and Losing



## 5.2 Gaining and Losing Factors

Working in concert, and to one degree or another, the factors listed below have shaped/continue to shape the social network of each participant and so the overall trajectory of each of their lives. Additionally, these factors operate in the coming out process itself.

### 5.2.1 *Homophobia:*

In Chapter 4, I discussed the historical context of participants' early lives. During the historical periods in which the participants came of age, heterosexuality was considered the only normal way of life or individual development. At that time, governmental, economic, religious, and educational institutions promulgated heterosexual life exclusively. Systemic homophobia was pervasive, guiding the behavior of participants and forcing them to hide their true selves. For years after divorcing her husband and having a lesbian affair, Ruth was fearful of being identified as a lesbian and she did not date or associate with other lesbians or gay males. She explained some the sanctions that she feared:

I was terrified, yeah, of losing my job, of losing my children, of losing my friends. Really, for seven years after I was divorced, I had—and I [had] ended that [lesbian] relationship I was in, I really don't remember—I don't think I ever was in any sort of [romantic] relationship at all. I had friends. I had friends cuz I was going to school for four years. I had a lot of friends through school. They were not gay friends, I don't think.

John believes one particular rule at the Catholic college he attended was fundamentally homophobic. He talked of his experience there and his understanding of this rule:

I liked the community of it. As I look back, I made very, very few friends. Part of that was also built in. Out of fear of homosexuality, they had a rule, early on, of



never two alone together. Always three, yes...Never two alone together. The way it was pitched was they didn't want people to be particular close friends. They wanted people to be community-oriented.

Mary attended a religious college with a similar rule, as she explained it, "They made us switch girlfriends [roommates] every year. They were so phobic about everything."

Homophobia has factored into the relationships of some participants with a family member or friend creating distance, or estrangement. After Frank was inadvertently "outed" by one brother, he received a letter from his other brother,

I got a letter from [my other brother] about three or four weeks later condemning me for being gay, and...he was just full of vitriol. I got several letters like that, until I finally called him. I said, "\_\_\_\_\_, if you wanna have any continued relationship with me, please, I don't wanna hear any more of this. This is foolish. You're barking up a tree that you have no business barking up."

The quality of Frank's relationship with this brother has not improved. During the interview, Frank spoke of him only in negative terms describing him as a "religious fanatic" and a "repressed homosexual."

One of John's daughters is not comfortable with his sexuality and is afraid to tell her fiancé the truth about her father. As John said, "...she is uncomfortable. I think she has a fiancé, I think, who's conventional in his thinking. She says, 'I can't tell him. I can't talk to him about this.'" John's daughter may or may not be homophobic herself. However, she believes her future husband is homophobic and (demonstrating that coming out is a family process) she goes into the closet, hiding her father's sexuality from her fiancé. Thus, John is distanced from both his daughter and his future son-in-law.

Some participants found it necessary to sever certain relations because of anticipated homophobia. After Luke came out to his wife, they decided to drop out of a bridge club to which they had belonged for many years. Luke explained, “It would be too awkward. That, ‘here’s [Luke] and he’s gay, and they’re still comin’ to bridge club and what do we do with ‘em?’”

When I asked James if he had lost anyone from his inner-circle (most important relations) when he came out, he told me of losing two long-time friends. He attributes these losses to their religious beliefs and irrational fears of homosexuals:

Yes, there were. There was a couple of my very good friends. I felt tragic, but I think it was more their religious beliefs just drove them. They’re good, die-hard Catholics... Yeah, they couldn’t [understand me coming out] and I think part of it is it could’ve been their wives. It could’ve been them. I think, in many cases, they’re worried about their kids. “We don’t want a gay man around our children. Aren’t they perverts?” You know the way people think. I lost two. It really hurt me because we had been friends since high school. To be friends for 15 or 20 years and then, or more, and then lose people—but it was their choice. I wasn’t gonna beg them. I wasn’t gonna chase them. I wasn’t gonna say, “Oh, come on. I’m no different than I used to be. I’m the same guy. I just happen to like guys, instead of girls.” In fact, I wanted to call up one of my friends say, “You should feel safer. I won’t chase your wife anymore.” I didn’t think that would be appropriate, so I figured that may not win him back, so we’ll just skip that comment.

Some participants internalized the homophobia that was so pervasive in society during their earlier lives. Internalized homophobia kept them in denial of their true self and fearful of

revealing themselves. Prior to coming out some participants avoided or feared contact with known homosexuals. Michael explained his experience: “I was afraid of gay people even though I always knew I was one.” Likewise, Mary talked of how when she was 14 a “little affectionate” experience she had with the younger sister of a friend at a sleepover left her with “a strange sensation.” Even though this experience was not sexual, and nothing ever came of it in terms of a relationship, it made a psychological impact on Mary. She explained the lasting consequence of this brief but intense encounter, “the older I got, the more I shut down.”

### **5.2.2 Religion/Religiosity:**

Religion shaped many of the study participants’ social networks. Religious beliefs wielded a strong influence on the early lives of some study participants. Several participants made the church their career by serving as priests, pastors, or within the governing body of their respective faiths. As already noted, some religious beliefs and practices encountered by study participants were inherently homophobic.

As a boy/young man, Luke tried to find some solace in his denomination’s doctrine on homosexuality which was markedly homophobic, but such were the times:

The church had decided in the 1960s, I guess, early ‘60s, that homosexuality could be healed. My church was a church that supported prayerful healing and serious mental and spiritual work on oneself. I embraced the view that my—that this [same-sex] attraction was simply a temptation that could be put over in the corner and destroyed.

Despite his commitment to the church’s doctrine, Luke could not find peace within himself. As he explained it, “I had very little experience with men, and I—it was all anonymous, and it was high in guilt production. I viewed it as something that I really didn’t want to have part of my

life.” Luke, who worked for much of his life in the national governing body of his church went through a long process of rethinking his religious beliefs, moving from the doctrinal tenets of his church to the more free-thinking, open practices of the gay spiritual group to which he now belongs. At middle-age Luke was searching for a new direction, so he enrolled in divinity school. Luke explained his reason for entering divinity school and where it led, “While I thought I was there to study other religious—non-Christian religious traditions and study the Bible and study ethics, I was also, during that time, being confronted with a culture that was extraordinarily open to GLBT issues and other issues of social justice.” The environment at divinity school brought Luke to a deeply personal epiphany:

In the midst of all that, I came to the realization one day, very literally, that, “oh my God”—and I don’t—that’s not an exclamation. It was just a statement. “Oh my God. I’ve been praying for the wrong thing for 40 years.” Meaning that I had been praying to be—find my true self which is straight instead of finding my *true self* [emphasis mine]. With that, I rather quickly accepted that understanding of myself and in rather short order came out to some friends and then to my wife.

After coming out, Luke felt the need to connect with other gay men in a deep and meaningful way, “Rather quickly, I dove into gay-related therapeutic activity. I knew I had to find more gay people, gay men, and I didn’t know how.” A friend from a men’s group to which Luke had belonged since entering divinity school referred him to a spiritually-oriented gay group:

Just on the strength of that recommendation, I drove out there for a spring gathering by myself. In some sense, that was the biggest coming out event of my life at that point, cuz I walked out into an early reception which had, whatever it

was, 30 or 40 gay men, and there I was. I've continued rather steadily to go to their [meetings].

At this first meeting for Luke, he was able to tell his story, be heard, and understood, "Almost everyone there was supportive and patient and good to me. That's what I was doing for a period of time. I guess that might be typical if people come out late in life. I was really doing therapeutic work." Luke has continued with this and other gay spiritual groups. In these groups, he has found a large and vibrant community and made many close friends.

As the case example of Renee (see Chapter 4) showed, religion played a role in some participant's family relations after they came out. Another example of the power of religion to shape family relationships is that of David and his daughter. David's daughter has not accepted him coming out. As David explained, "My daughter's religious. My daughter, by the way, never fully accepted the fact that I'm gay." He went on to tell how his daughter does not want to associate with his roommate,

We've had her to the house, the whole family, with my son when they're in town. They usually come on Thanksgiving and Christmas. Just to make things go easy, I had my son and his wife and daughter over at the same time. We had a great time, but when it came time to talk about him [David's roommate] visiting her in Arkansas, that was...that was out of the question. She actually—the look on her face. We're sort of estranged in that sense... When she comes to town, eventually, I know she's in town. Although a lot of times she spends a lot of time here, I probably see her, over a two-month period, maybe three times... When we see one another, as long as we don't talk about being gay and talk about him [my roommate], everything is fine. It's just like father and daughter...

So, David's relationship with his daughter is ambivalent, because of her religious beliefs. Despite the tensions this creates in their mutual relationship (and possibly David's relationship with his roommate) David ranks his daughter in his inner circle, because she is family. Thus, for David family unity trumps even a disagreement over something as fundamental as his sexual identity.

### *5.2.3 Ageism:*

Several participants reported being confronted with ageist views when they came out. For instance, some encountered an argument that they were too old to care about sex, so why come out now. One of Luke's brother's-in-law's, told him something to the effect of, "You're too old for all this for heaven's sake. Get over it!" In the context of Luke's coming out, the admonishment was also homophobic, as it seemed to imply that being gay or lesbian is purely a sexual obsession and nothing more.

Anna's grandmother viewed Anna's coming out as something of an age-related health condition. As Anna explained it, "My grandmother was still alive when I came out. Her theory was my hormones were screwed up from menopause that's what was wrong with me." The implication here is also homophobic. In her grandmother's thinking, Anna could not possibly be lesbian because that would mean there is something "wrong" with her mentally or morally. Instead Anna's grandmother determined that she had a physical problem that was causing her to think she was attracted to another woman.

Ageism is interwoven with John's coming out process and his evolving social network in several ways. When John first came out, he was surprised by the young men he met online who were attracted to him,

Then, in the process of chatting with people on [gay-oriented website], I'd be contacted by these very young people, with whom I could have an adult

conversation. The first guy I met, when we met, I would've been 70. He was 29...I would find that I could have a conversation with the younger guys. Had nothing against dating a guy my own age, or whatever age. Obviously, in some ways, the younger guy's more attractive. I ended up dating a 29-year-old. Then, after we broke up, I started talking to a guy who, at the time, was 23.

John's children have some ambivalence towards him, not because he came out, but rather because of the much younger men he has been dating,

Recently, I thought my kids were all okay with it. I thought that my younger daughter and my son didn't wanna talk about it, but they were okay—and they are okay with it. My younger daughter recently said, "I'm not okay with it." I think she basically sees it as she's not comfortable with my being with someone who is near her, not that different from her in age. She is utterly convinced that they're just out to take advantage of me.

John has also encountered the same resistance among some of his long-time straight male friends. As he put it, "I think the male friends that I have, straight male friends, I think are just skeptical about this younger-older thing." Additionally, John has had to face his own ageist views,

If you had said to me—in other words, if I see a guy my age with a guy the age of the guys that I've dated, it looks grotesque to me. It's ridiculous. I think most people look at it and they say, "There's a pathetic old man, trying to relive his youth, or just going after something that is really not available to him, and a gold digger, a younger gold digger taking advantage of the older guy," and so on.

Although John has tried dating older men, men near his age, he has been disappointed with those he has met,

I initially thought I would meet a man my own age...older guys. I just found the older guys, and they were all about sex—the ones I met, they were either all about sex, they were all about being gay, or they were just, for whatever reason, just very unappealing.

Finally, John has found that dating younger men has typecast him in the eyes of some potential boyfriends making it difficult to get a date with a man closer to his age. John explained,

It's just you're on the internet. You're talking to people. Some conversations go better than others...there's the feedback. In other words, yes, I get a certain amount of—not the feedback to the younger-older, because a lot of the chats are on the [gay-oriented website], or through people I met. They know. They're aware of older-younger. They may not be themselves. They may be older, looking for older, themselves. They're aware that there is that. What I do get there is, if I tell people the last person I dated was younger, they'll say—they'll assume that I'm only interested in people of a certain age, and therefore, not interested in them, or something like that...In other words, they think people are fixed in their preferences.

#### **5.2.4 Community:**

A sense of community (or the lack of it) has figured in the lives and the forming of the social networks of study participants. In their earlier lives, most study participants found community in their religious faith, and/or their careers. As part of their coming out process, most of the study participants found support in the “gay community.” For example, when Anna and



her future wife first began their relationship, they pragmatically sought advice from a gay social service center, because they felt they were entering the unknown. As Anna explained:

I knew I was in love with her but I knew nothing about gay culture really. The two of us—I remember we went to LA. There was a gay services center. We went to talk to someone. I remember the two of us were like scared because it was such like a foreign world to us.

In their interviews, when I asked them what advice they would offer those who come out later in life or what lessons they have learned from coming out later in life, several participants recommended becoming involved in the gay/lesbian community. For example, Theresa (see Chapter 4) whose social life for many years revolved around the gay country music scene, and a mainstream Protestant congregation that is very welcoming of gays and lesbians told me:

...the advice that I would give that helped me is to get associated with other gay people as soon as you can...if I hadn't done that and gotten to go to all these gay things, then it would have been very hard. As it turned out, it was not that hard for me because there was so many things that I could get involved in, and I did. Just get involved in—and going to [my church] and being—having so many gay things there. My best advice is just to try to get associated with as many gay friends and organizations as you can. Yeah.

For some participants, the gay community is the center of their social lives. David told me that, “I’d say 99 percent of the people I hang out with are gay. I’d say all of them are. Not 99.” In contrast, although James recommended becoming involved in the gay community to those coming out late, he cautioned becoming part of the gay community might take time. He

also tempered his recommendation with the thought of not making one's gay identity the total focus of one's life:

Be patient because you're gonna need a lot of patience, if you come out late in life, because you're the new guy on the block...it's hard to become part of the group. A few are accepting, but most are not. You have to be patient, and you just have to join different groups. You'll see which ones you fit in and which ones you don't. You'll meet some people. Some of them will become friends. Even a few might end up being...in your inner circle...I say don't just—just don't live in the gay world, either. I don't know how people do that. All their friends are gay.

They only do things that other gay people are doing. They go to gay bars. They go to gay parties. They go to gay this, gay that. Don't cut off the rest of your life.

Indeed, for James, restructuring his social network after coming out has not been easy. He has found it difficult to integrate into the gay community, as he explained it:

I found getting into the gay world, if you wanna call it that—I found that very difficult. Cuz I find that gay people can be as prejudiced as non-gay people, if not more prejudiced. I've even made that statement to a few and said, for people who want to be so accepted, you are so unwilling to accept others that aren't like you, that don't agree with you. Even that was a problem. Of course, relationships in the gay world is like—god, that is so difficult. God! It's almost enough to make me wanna go out with a woman again.

James believes that coming out late has made it harder for him to become integrated into the gay community. He feels the impact of this in a very personal way,

I guess the biggest thing in my life—so, obviously, you know, I’m 65. I don't wanna be alone. I don't wanna be alone. I’m almost desperately seeking not—I have friends. I want a partner or something. That’s my biggest issue now. I think a lot of it has to do, again, with you come out late, and you’re not originally part of the gay organization, and so it’s harder to get to know people.

On the other hand, some participants have no desire to center their social life around the gay community. John does not see sexual identity as the primary factor in the construction of his social world, as he put it:

I don't find a world in which the main thing that you have in common is your sexual orientation to be a very interesting world. Where you’re talking about gay jokes, look at that guy, blah, blah, blah. Every time the word [is] any body part or something, there’s some gay joke about. I just don’t find that an interesting world.

Speaking of the local affiliate of a national organization for older gay men, John says, “...it’s a very nice group. I just don’t find I can generate much conversation with these people. I just don’t seem to.” and later he added, “Now, [gay organization] it’s just a bunch of people. What they have in common is being gay. That only goes so far.” John believes that coming out later in life has caused his ties to the gay community less strong, for historical and personal reasons. John also sees potential conflicts with men he might date whose lives revolve around the gay community. As John told me:

I think that they’re more integrated into the gay community than I am. I think, especially the ones who came out years and years ago. Obviously, the battle is still going for equal rights, but it was a very different battle, in those days. It bound people together, within the gay community, very closely. A lot of those

people still are bound together, in that way. I feel I've come in at not exactly the tail end, but there's a lot more acceptance today. I think my life is different in that there's less need for—I don't know. I feel less—I'm more bound up with my friends and my kids and so on, and less bound up with the gay community...than people who came out much earlier. I think part of that is temperamental. I think a lot of people like the gay social life, like getting together with other gay people and doing things. I find that, as I try to date, I'll see that some of these people I'm dating are much more integrated...in the gay community. I'm hoping that, if we get to that point, that I'll be okay, I'll be able to deal with that.

Ruth has found a sense of community in gay-centered groups, as well as beyond them. She finds connections that expand her social network in a variety of communities including: an exercise class for older women, art classes at a senior center, and various online arts and crafts groups to which she belongs.

William and his husband find a sense of community in the support group where they met over thirty years ago. William counts at least three friends he has made in the support group as in the inner circle of his social network. They also find community in their church. Both were once connected to the Catholic Church, but they now belong to a much more open and free-thinking church. William explained,

The church was always part of my life, a religious community, but when I was married [to my wife] it was the Catholic Church. We were active there. I know when [my husband] and I moved to New York, we found—he was raised Catholic, and he really felt estranged from the church. He didn't like the stand that they had with gay—we went to something—an organization in New York

City...for gay practicing Catholics. We went to a couple of meetings, and their stance was there's nothing wrong with being gay as long as you remain chaste.

That was kinda ridiculous, so we stopped going there. Then we found [more free-thinking] Church. It's a liberal church, actually, in New York. We began there, and we just followed it right through all the time we lived in Florida.

Although Frank told me that "...my social network is primarily gay today," he went on to explain his broad, all-encompassing sense of community, which is grounded in his deeper convictions and beliefs:

My life did not revolve around my being gay. My life revolved around the wellbeing of all people. People closely and people afar. I did not identify with the gay enclave or the gay population until I was in a relationship with \_\_\_\_, which was 1981. Again, I wouldn't say the gay community is my people as opposed to the rest. They're just one of the groups—I'm concerned about prisoners. I'm very concerned about the death penalty, extremely concerned about the death penalty...I have passions that go far beyond my gay community. I mean I embrace the gay community, but they're one of the communities among numbers of communities. I'm very concerned about the homeless, particularly veterans who have mental issues due to their service in the war. In Vietnam and now with the [wars in Afghanistan and Iraq].

### **5.2.5 Social Media:**

Social media was an important factor in the coming out process of some study participants. Through the use of social media, some participants have transformed and continue to shape their individual social networks. Ruth enjoys contact with other artists and artisans via

social networking sites devoted to particular arts and crafts. Matthew (see Chapter 4) met his first long-term gay romantic partner via the internet. The realization that his Facebook page left him open to inadvertent disclosure of his sexual identity to his relatives led Matthew to come out to his family. After John separated from his second wife, he tried dating women that he met online. In his words, “It just didn’t work.” Though he knew he was attracted to other men, he had never had a sexual relationship or encounter with another man. John started meeting other men via various dating and gay-oriented websites. Dating websites offer the user exposure to more potential and various romantic partners than might be encountered in typical social situations of everyday life. Through such sites, John has been able to connect with men much younger than himself. Matthew gave this advice, noting that it is now possible to get connected to the gay community via social media,

...in today’s world, unless you live in like Butte, Montana, and even then, there’s so many organizations. They may not be physically located where you are but they are cyberly located. There are cyber networks out there, whether it’s to get sex or to be socialized or to do both...They’re out there. We’re no longer [hidden] we can walk through the front door.

### **5.2.6 *Protective Strategies:***

Some participants employ/employed protective strategies to conceal their true sexual identity from others. As they have navigated the coming out process, these behaviors have shaped and continue to shape their social networks. As already noted, other than his sister Michael (see Chapter 4) has never come out to his family or the people of hometown. He believes if he did his aged mother would be harassed by others in the small town where he grew up. Thus Michael exists somewhere on the “continuum of outness”. Likewise, Theresa (see

Chapter 4) has not revealed her sexual orientation to other residents at the senior living apartment building where she has lived for the past ten years, because she fears discrimination.

William described how when he and his now husband first got together, "...we weren't really open..." William was concerned that if his sexual orientation was public knowledge, it would have a negative impact on the business he and his father owned:

I felt a little awkward, only because of public opinion. Probably I was concerned about self-image. I had [a] business with my father in the town where I lived, so I dealt with hundreds of people who were customers. I said, "Gee, this is—" It was a small town, so I thought, "This is not gonna be good for business for people to know about this and discuss it." That was a little bit concern of mine. When was I gonna be confronted? What was somebody gonna say? What was I gonna say?

Despite being in business together, William never told his father he was gay. William explained:

No, I never really had a conversation with him about being gay. I did with my sister. She knew that I was [gay], about that same time, but I never did with [my father]—I just didn't. You know?

Later in the 1980's, William left the business for a career in teaching. He found it necessary to continue to hide his identity:

I was a little concerned when I was teaching in a private school in New York City as to how the kids would react. They were junior high kids. I never really came out in the school. The very few people who knew—they might've been other gay teachers in the school system who were closeted and kept that way... I worked in the public school system for a while, too, in New York. No, I was definitely—I did not come out as being gay.

After he came out, James told his mother, but he withheld the fact from his father until it was almost too late. James explained:

... my father was true blue American. I used to call him the original Archie Bunker, if you remember that show... *All in the Family*. He was pretty straightforward with what he liked and what he didn't like, and he made no bones about it when he spoke. I just knew, if I told him, he would've just freaked out and probably disowned me. It took a long time. I was out for a long time. In fact, it was when he was dying that I finally told him. I never told him before that. My mother knew. I had told my mom. Cuz I knew she would be, let's say, disappointed, but accepting. I was still her son... My mom knew. Shortly after I had come out, I talked to her. I asked her not to tell my father, and she said she wouldn't, cuz she knew—she also knew how he would react. When my dad was sick and we all knew it was only a matter of time, whatever that time was, I sat with him and told him. I always had—I never had—I never had a relationship with my dad, where I always felt I could talk to him and tell him things. I knew he loved me, and I loved him, but it was never one of those put my arm around you and I'll walk you through the park, and stuff like that. He kept his distance on that type of thing. It was the way he was raised, I'm sure.

Ruth also has experienced a long coming out process. As she told me, "I was never out at work." Even though she lived with her children and her partner in the same house, Ruth did not come out to her children for many years because she feared her children and her children's friends would reject her. Ruth and her partner maintained a ruse of having separate bedrooms. Despite Ruth's concealment, her daughters knew. When Ruth finally came out to her middle



daughter, she replied, “Well, it’s about time you told me. I know. I’ve known for years, since we’ve lived—since [your partner] lived with us in the house for years.”

Ruth has been reluctant to tell health care providers her sexual orientation, but her partner has no such qualms. Subverting Ruth’s self-protective strategies, Ruth’s partner has (probably inadvertently) “outed” Ruth to several of her health care providers. Ruth explained:

[My partner] and I had appointments with the dermatologist. She saw [my partner] first. Then she came in. She looked at what I had wanted her to look at. I can't remember what it was, something on my face. Then she said, “[Your partner] wanted me to look at something on your backside—on your butt.” [My partner] had told, [my partner] had told her, [my partner] had come out. [My partner] decided to go to my dentist. I wasn’t out to my dentist. [My partner] decided to go to my primary doctor who I’d seen for ten years, who didn’t know I had a partner. [My partner] was out to my primary doctor. [My partner] decided to go to my eye doctor...I’m out to all my physicians now. It’s something I would’ve never mentioned, even though I was out. That’s when you say it’s a process. I would’ve never been out to them. I don't think it was a necessity. It’s not something I bring up, still...Not that I’m afraid. Well, I don't know. Maybe I was afraid that I would be discriminated against, if I came out to anybody but a gay physician. I don't know if I’m out to my cardiologist, but [my partner’s] seeing him, so yes, I would assume that—

Protective strategies employed by study participants have served another function for them. For some, withholding disclosure is an expression of individual autonomy, i.e. personal dignity. Several informants stated that they did not feel compelled to disclose their sexual

orientation to others. David is not out to people at the gym where he is a member. As he put it, "...not at the gym, cuz it's none of their business..." When principles were invoked, as David did in the foregoing quote, participants were seeking more than just maintaining their individual privacy. David's statement, "it's none of their business", carries the unspoken implication of "it's my life." Thus, like some other participants, David maintains his dignity, and individual autonomy by not disclosing his sexual orientation.

Several other participants made it clear that they did not feel bound to disclose their sexuality, because they do not believe their sexual orientation is the sum of their total person. When I asked James if coming out affected his career, he said,

No, because I didn't run to work the next day and raise a flag over my desk and say, "Hey, I'm gay." I don't wear it on my sleeve. I don't deny it, if somebody asks me, but I don't tell the world I am.

On the surface, it seems James was just protecting his career. However, his proclamation "I don't wear it on my sleeve" says more. He maintained his autonomy, and his dignity, by choosing to whom and under what circumstances he discloses.

Frank expanded on the idea of managing disclosure by relating it to who he is in total and to what he believes is his purpose in life to be,

If there are—if it's an issue where [gay rights organization] has a cause I'm there to help support it. If I have time, and if I support the cause, I'm not at all—I have no problem in being out—being identified with the gay community. It's not something where I wear a placard saying I'm gay. I think that would be silly. I think it would be counterproductive. People don't say, "I'm heterosexual." One's sexuality is really not—unless you're fighting for a cause, it's really not a—it

shouldn't be an issue. It's somewhat private...My life did not revolve around my being gay. My life revolved around the wellbeing of all people.

Alice put this idea of personal autonomy, complexity, and dignity quite simply, "I'm not just a lesbian, I'm a human being."

### **5.3 Gaining and Losing Summary**

In summary, the factors discussed above influenced the social action of "gaining and losing" and so continue to shape each participant's social network. Intertwined with the evolution of each participant's social network is the coming out process itself, which is also influenced by these factors. For this study's participants the coming out process constitutes an "off-time" event that due to its often lengthy and ongoing quality marks not just a turning point but rather a defining trajectory in the life course. Additionally, the overarching factor of a historical context in which society has transformed from being monolithically heterosexual to one where same-sex marriage is at least legal if not yet normative, must be considered in order to understand the individual life courses of this study's participants and the impact coming out late has had on each of their social networks.

## 6 DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

In this chapter, I provide a brief overview of the study, share some thoughts on the coming out process; consider the gerontological significance of my findings; and discuss some implications of this study including its limitations, strengths, and potential future directions it suggests.

This study examined the impact that coming out at mid- or later life had on individuals' social networks. Utilizing a qualitative research approach, I conducted in-depth interviews with a sample of fourteen older adults who disclosed their non-heterosexual identity at or after age 39. Data gathered in the interviews was analyzed using the Grounded Theory Method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Findings show that coming out later in life can be a continuous, non-linear (and reversible) process that shapes and is shaped by actual or perceived gains and losses in one's social network. The experiences of this group of older adults demonstrate that gains and losses in one's social network are often associated with disclosing a non-heterosexual identity at mid- or later life. This gaining and losing is influenced by a variety of factors. Factors span the micro to the macro producing individual outcomes that can vary in the extreme. An interplay exists between the often continuous process of coming out and the evolution of one's social network. Thus, the proposition of coming out at mid- or later is inherently risky. One may or may not suffer rejection from key members of one's social network, particularly immediate family and long-time friends, at a time in life when the need for social support is likely increasing and possibly acute.

This research was informed by the Life Course Perspective (Alwin, 2012; Elder & Johnson, 2003; Elder & Rockwell, 1979; Hagestad, 2003; R. Settersten Jr., 2003). Elder and Rockwell (1979) noted that the import of events across the life course depend on their timing and

their context. Informants of the present study share the commonality of coming out at mid-life or later. Further, most study participants share the common experience of suppression of and angst over their sexual identity from a young age to well into their adult lives. Their individual struggles with non-heterosexual identity are largely due to the weight of negative prevailing societal attitudes toward homosexuality during the historical times in which they were born, raised, and assumed adulthood. Prevalent normative expectations surrounding marriage and family, as well as education and career, marked the lives of study participants. Most participants responded to these pressures by marrying and having children. A few responded by avoiding marriage (and intimacy) altogether and only after coming out did they find they could have an intimate relationship with another person. At some point in their lives, participants found it necessary to disclose (or to own) the sexual identity they had so long suppressed. There is much variation within the sample regarding the coming out process itself. However, even in the instances where participants made sweeping disclosures of their true sexual identity to most everyone important to them at one time, these singular events were usually the resolution of years (decades in fact) of internal conflict. Thus this study confirms previous work that suggests coming out is a long and a continuous process (Li & Orleans, 2001; Orel, 2004; Rickards & Wuest, 2006). In sum, from a life course perspective, study participants' individual lives mark trajectories shaped by the influences of historical time, cohort effects, social timing, individual variability and agency, as well as the coming out process itself and the degree to which one is out or not, i.e. continuum of "outness." The combination of these factors forms the context in which I understood these lives and do much to explain how each participant's social networks have evolved.

For study participants, coming out occurred and continues in conjunction with an evolving social network. Influenced by a variety of factors, the dynamics of actual or anticipated gains and losses of important relationships in one's social network either encouraged or inhibited disclosure of one's non-heterosexual identity. Thus disclosure was often a gradual, selective, and continuous process, forming, in terms of the life course perspective, a "trajectory" (Elder & Johnson, 2003). For most of the participants, over a period of many years, literally decades, this trajectory traced a long, near flat arc. As one participant observed, "We structured our lives around it [guarding disclosure of our homosexual identity]." For a few disclosure was a singular event marking a "turning point" (Elder & Johnson, 2003). Regardless of the speed or breadth of the process, participants' individual social networks were transformed by and continue to be transformed in response to their individual disclosures of non-heterosexual identity at mid- or later life. Thus social networks of most, if not all, of this study's participants could not be reduced to simple before disclosure/after disclosure dichotomies. Even though participants reported an actual age of coming out; it was a process for them, and arguably a process that continues for some.

The finding that coming out is a continuous process, aligns this study with existing research. For example, Li and Orleans (2001) described coming out as a "lifetime project" for Asian American lesbians (p. 76). Likewise, Rickards and Wuest (2006) wrote of "perpetual outing" as a concern for their informants (p. 451). Orel (2004) found that the process of coming out is "lifelong" and in fact beneficial for gay, lesbian, and bisexual older adults because the skills gained combatting heterosexism necessitated by coming out were the same skills needed to resist ageism in society (p. 72).

The evolution of study participants' social networks was often related to individual, situation-specific decisions to disclose or not disclose their sexual orientation. Participants managed information about their sexuality for a number of reasons including: protecting themselves from discrimination; protecting others, family in particular, from discrimination; and maintaining their own sense of dignity and autonomy. This finding reinforces the notion that there is "continuum of outness." Friend (1990) hypothesized that older gay and lesbian individuals exist on a cognitive-behavioral continua that includes: 1) Stereotypic (marked by fear/internalized homophobia). 2) Passing (possess some degree of self-acceptance, but overall view heterosexuality as better). 3) Affirmative (positive sense of self and own sexuality). Using these categories, Friend theorized that "Affirmative" gays and lesbians would age successfully because they would find the social support they needed among family and friends.

Orel's (2004) study noted that decisions to disclose one's non-heterosexual orientation made by gay, lesbian, and bisexual older adults are calculations of risk "based on a thoughtful deliberation of the potential consequences" (p. 72). Likewise, the present study found participants did or did not disclose depending on the situation or the particular personal relationship. Failing to disclose to family led participants in Orel's (2008) study to feel emotionally isolated from family (p. 68), while disclosure, "increased the participants' likelihood of meeting similar others" (p. 72), a clear social benefit. In a similar vein, Grossman, Augelli, and Hershberger (2000) found that gay, lesbian, and bisexual older (60+) adults were more satisfied with the social support they received if they were out to members of their social network. Participants in a study by Tester (2012) of older gay men's relationship to the gay community reported improvements in the "social, psychological, and spiritual" aspects of their

lives, despite the “difficulties” of “losing family and friends” coming out may have caused (p. 13).

This study furthers understandings of the operation of solidarity and by definition conflict and ambivalence (see Bengston, Giarusso, Mabry, and Silverstein, 2002 for discussion of terms) in family relations. At least for the person coming out, my findings suggest that normative solidarity (commitment to family and one’s role in a family) may have greater influence than consensual solidarity (within family agreement on values, beliefs, and attitudes). David’s relationship with his daughter (see Chapter 5), and Renee’s relationship with her father and her sisters, (see Chapter 4) demonstrate the unifying power of normative solidarity, obligatory though it may be, in the face of conflicts over core values and beliefs, in these cases the participants’ sexual orientations in opposition to their relatives religious beliefs. In both the foregoing examples, the participants counted these family members as most important despite the fact that they were in conflict with them over a most fundamental aspect of their own persons, their sexuality.

Conflict and ambivalence in family relations caused by a relative’s coming out has been noted by other researchers. LaSala (2000) found, “some parents may never be able to have relationships with their openly gay, adult children, and will sever all ties when their son or daughter comes out” (pp. 78-79). Likewise, Lynch and Murray (2000) who studied the disclosure practices of lesbian and gay stepparents found that for some gays and lesbians coming out to their family of origin led to the loss of their parents or, at best, tentative acceptance. Beeler and DiProva (1999) found families may neither offer total acceptance or total rejection when family member comes out as a gay or lesbian. Beeler and DiProva (1999) noted, that the themes that emerged from the interviews they conducted with family members of gay/lesbian individuals



occurred within “*the context of life events*” [emphasis mine], introducing the “element of chance” and so “considerable variation” in outcomes when a relative disclosed a non-heterosexual identity (p. 454). In contrast, Li and Orleans (2001) identified the fundamental value of “family unity” within Asian American society as the salient factor in resolving the coming out crisis within families of young adult lesbians. As my findings show, coming out at mid- or later life can impact an individual’s social network by resulting in decided losses or gains in relationships, or mixed outcomes of ongoing conflict and ambivalence.

There are several limitations of the present study. First, the sample population is small, predominantly White, and well-educated. These attributes limit the generalizability of its results. Thus this study does little to expand our understanding of older non-heterosexual minority populations or their coming out experiences. Further research of older non-heterosexual minority populations is needed. Second, participation in this study may reflect a positive bias among the participants. Their willingness to participate may be associated with an affirmative view of self. Third, the accounts recorded here are all from the individual coming out, so we only know their “side of the story.” Family, friends, and others who are members of individual participant’s social networks might view the events reported here quite differently. Although some extant research has captured the viewpoint of family members of those who come out later in life (Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Davies, 2008; Joos & Broad, 2007; Tasker et al., 2010), to date, the total body of this work is limited. Given that social support has been found to be critical to health and well-being in later life and that coming out risks the loss of such support, more research devoted to the social networks of those who come out later in life is very much needed.

The qualitative nature of this study is one of its strengths. The in-depth interviews allowed the deeper meanings of events in the individuals’ lives discussed here to be highlighted

and better understood. By focusing specifically on the coming out experiences of those who disclosed their sexual identity at mid- or later life, this study makes a significant contribution to the large body of “coming out” literature, much of which has been concerned with the experiences of younger people, and/or their families. Thus, these findings add to the research of lesbian, gay, and bisexual older adults in general, as well as the scant literature on those who come out later in life in particular. Additionally, this paper furthers previous work in regards to the dynamics of social networks; and the impacts of ageism and heterosexism on the life course of individuals.

Viewed from a practical standpoint, the results of this study have several implications:

1) Due to the powerful influence of normative solidarity, older gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons may report close family relations. However, these reported relationships may not be sources of actual or available social support. The closeness attributed to these relations, may only be a reflection of the reporter’s emotional attachments to the idea of these family relationships, rather than the practical reality of them. Thus, in order to better serve their clientele, the challenge for clinicians, social workers, and so on is to understand the quality and strength of their clients’ individual family ties. Enhancement of existing and development of new programs and training for those who work with older adults, particularly non-heterosexual populations may be in order. Cultural competency training should include information about those who come out later in life as a particular at-risk group. 2) Several study respondents turned to lesbian/gay organizations and/or support groups during their individual process of coming out. Some continue participation in such organizations. These facts highlight the need for continued/expanded public and private funding of social support services and community organizations designed to aid the older non-heterosexual population in general, and those who come out later in life in particular. Such

programs and services should extend to help the families of these groups as well. 3) Knowledge of an individual's sexual orientation is necessary in order to provide comprehensive health care. However, as this study has shown non-heterosexual older adults may, consciously or reflexively, withhold this information. Such reluctance to disclose is not unfounded. Research has established that older non-heterosexuals are at risk of discrimination in variety of care settings from acute to long-term (SAGE & MAP, 2010). Programs designed to eliminate discrimination in the delivery of services, as well as programs to build trust between care providers and their clients are essential.

In conclusion, the 2015 ruling by the United States Supreme Court granting marriage equality to same-sex couples demonstrates the increasing acceptance of non-heterosexual individuals in American society at the structural level. However, it would be mistaken to interpret the Supreme Court's watershed ruling as the end of discrimination in our individual social relations. Despite the broadening of legal accommodations for lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals, at the micro-level of social relations, this study finds that the impact of disclosing one's non-heterosexual identity at mid- or later life on one's social network is various, unpredictable, and potentially wrought with alienation and conflict.

## REFERENCES

- Allen, K. R. (2005). Gay and lesbian elders. In M. L. Johnson, V. L. Bengtson, P. G. Coleman, & T. B. L. Kirkwood (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of age and ageing*. (pp. 482–489). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Altman, C. (1999). Gay and lesbian seniors: Unique challenges of coming out in later life. *SIECUS Report*, 27(3), 14.
- Alwin, D. F. (2012). Integrating varieties of life course concepts. *Journals of Gerontology: Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 67B(2), 206–220.
- Antonucci, T. C. (1986). Hierarchical mapping technique. *Generations*, 10, 10–12.
- Antonucci, T. C., Akiyama, H., & Lansford, J. E. (1998). Negative effects of close social relations. *Family Relations*, (4), 379–384.
- Antonucci, T. C., Birditt, K. S., Sherman, C. W., & Trinh, S. (2011). Stability and change in the intergenerational family: A convoy approach. *Ageing and Society*, 31(7), 1084–1106.
- Baptist, J., & Allen, K. (2008). A family's coming out process: Systemic change and multiple realities. *Contemporary Family Therapy: An International Journal*, 30(2), 92–110.
- Beeler, J., & DiProva, V. (1999). Family adjustment following disclosure of homosexuality by a member: Themes discerned in narrative accounts. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 25(4), 443–459.
- Bengtson, V. L. (2001). Beyond the nuclear family: The increasing importance of multigenerational bonds. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 63(1), 1–16.
- Bengtson, V., Giarrusso, R., Mabry, J. B., & Silverstein, M. (2002). Solidarity, Conflict, and Ambivalence: Complementary or Competing Perspectives on Intergenerational Relationships? *Journal of Marriage and Family*, (3), 568.

- Bengtson, V. L., & Roberts, R. E. L.. (1991). Intergenerational solidarity in aging families: An example of formal theory construction. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, (4), 856.
- Bengtson, V. L., Schrader, S. (1982). Parent-child relations. In D. J. Mangen & W. A. Peterson (Eds.), *Research instruments in social gerontology, volume 2: Social roles and social participation* (pp. 115–185). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bérubé, A. (1990). *Coming out under fire: The history of gay men and women in World War Two* / Allan Bérubé. New York: Free Press, c1990.
- Bowen, G. (2008). Naturalistic inquiry and the saturation concept: a research note. *Qualitative Research*, 8(1), 137–152.
- Breshears, D. (2011). *A dialectical analysis of discourses surrounding children's experiences of parental disclosures of homosexuality*. The University of Nebraska - Lincoln, Ann Arbor.
- Buxton, A. P. (2004). Works in progress: How mixed-orientation couples maintain their marriages after the wives come out. *Journal of Bisexuality*, 4(1/2), 57–82.
- Buxton, A. P. (2006). When a spouse comes out: Impact on the heterosexual partner. *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity*, 13(2/3), 317–332.
- Buxton, A. P. (2012). Straight husbands whose wives come out as lesbian or bisexual: Men's voices challenge the "masculinity myth". *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 8(1), 23–45.
- Bybee, J. A., Sullivan, E. L., Zielonka, E., & Moes, E. (2009). Are gay men in worse mental health than heterosexual men? The role of age, shame and guilt, and coming-out. *Journal of Adult Development*, 16(3), 144–154.
- Calzo, J. P., Antonucci, T. C., Mays, V. M., & Cochran, S. D. (2011). Retrospective recall of sexual orientation identity development among gay, lesbian, and bisexual adults. *Developmental Psychology*, 47(6), 1658–1673.

- Connidis, I. A. (2010). *Family ties & aging* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: Pine Forge Press.
- Crouch, M., & McKenzie, H. (2006). The logic of small samples in interview-based qualitative research. *Social Science Information*, (45), 483–99.
- Dank, B. (1971). Coming out in the gay world. *Psychiatry*, 34(May 1971), 60–77.
- Davies, K. (2008). Adult daughters whose mothers come out later in life: What is the psychosocial impact? *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 12(2/3), 255–263.
- Elder, G. H., & Rockwell, R. C. (1979). The life-course and human development: An ecological perspective. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 2(1), 1.
- Floyd, F. J., & Bakeman, R. (2006). Coming-out across the life course: Implications of age and historical context. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 35(3), 287–296.
- Fredriksen - Goldsen, K., Emler, C., Kim, H.-J., Muraco, A., Erosheva, E., Goldsen, J., & Hoy-Ellis, C. (2013). The physical and mental health of lesbian, gay male, and bisexual (LGB) older adults: The role of key health indicators and risk and protective factors. *Gerontologist*, 53(4), 664–675.
- Fredriksen - Goldsen, K., Kim, H.-J., Emler, C., Muraco, A., Erosheva, E., Hoy-Ellis, C., ... Petry, H. (2012). The aging and health report: Disparities and resilience among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender older adults. Retrieved from <http://depts.washington.edu/agepride/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Full-report10-25-12.pdf>
- Fruhauf, C. A., Orel, N. A., & Jenkins, D. A. (2009). The coming-out process of gay grandfathers: Perceptions of their adult children's influence. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 5(1/2), 99–118.

- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Grossman, A. H., D'Augelli, A. R., & Hershberger, S. L. (2000). Social support networks of lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults 60 years of age and older. *Journals of Gerontology: Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, *55B*(3), 171–179.
- Grov, C., Bimbi, D. S., Nanín, J. E., & Parsons, J. T. (2006). Race, ethnicity, gender, and generational factors associated with the coming-out process among gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals. *Journal of Sex Research*, *43*(2), 115–121.
- Hagestad, G. (2003). Interdependent lives and relationships in changing times: A life-course view of families and aging. In R. Settersten (Ed.), *Invitation to the life course*. (pp. 135–159) Amityville, New York: Baywood Publishing Company, Inc.
- Johnston, L. B., & Jenkins, D. (2004). Coming out in mid-adulthood: Building a new identity. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, *16*(2), 19–42.
- Joos, K., & Broad, K. (2007). Coming out of the family closet: Stories of adult women with LGBTQ parent(s). *Qualitative Sociology*, *30*(3), 275–295.
- Kahn, R. L., & Antonucci, T. C. (1980). Convoys over the life course: attachment, roles, and social support. *Life-Span Development and Behavior*, *3*, 253–286.
- Kelley, S., Whitley, D., & Campos, P. (2010). Grandmothers raising grandchildren: Results of an intervention to improve health outcomes. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, *42*(4), 379–386. doi:10.1111/j.1547-5069.2010.01371.x
- Kus, R. (1985). Stages of coming out: an ethnographic approach. *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, *7*(2), 177–194.
- Li, L., & Orleans, M. (2001). Coming out discourses of Asian American lesbians. *Sexuality & Culture*, *5*(2), 57.

- Lynch, J. M., & Murray, K. (2000). For the love of the children: The coming out process for lesbian and gay parents and stepparents. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 39(1), 1.
- Matzner, A. (2011). Stonewall riots. *GLBTQ Social Sciences*, 1–3.
- Morrow, D. (1996). Coming-out issues for adult lesbians: A group intervention. *Social Work*, 41(6), 647–656.
- Muraco, A. (2006). Intentional families: Fictive kin ties between cross-gender, different sexual orientation friends. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 68(5), 1313–1325.
- Muraco, A., & Fredriksen-Goldsen, K. (2011). “That’s what friends do”: Informal caregiving for chronically ill midlife and older lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults. *Journal of Social & Personal Relationships*, 28(8), 1073–1092.
- Neugarten, B. L., Moore, J. W., & Lowe, J. C. (1965). Age norms, age constraints, and adult socialization. *American Journal of Sociology*, 70(6), 710.
- Orel, N. A. (2004). Gay, lesbian, and bisexual elders: expressed needs and concerns across focus groups. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 43(2/3), 57–77. doi:10.1300/J083v43n02\_05
- Peacock, J. R. (2000). Gay male adult development: some stage issues of an older cohort. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 40(2), 13–29.
- Perkins, M. M., Ball, M. M., Whittington, F. J., & Combs, B. L. (2004). Managing the care needs of low-income board-and-care home residents: a process of negotiating risks. *Qualitative Health Research*, 14(4), 478–495.
- Pew Research Center. (2013, June 13). A survey of LGBT Americans: Attitudes, experiences and values in changing times. Retrieved from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/06/13/a-survey-of-lgbt-americans/>



Retrieved February 20, 2016, from <http://www.people-press.org/2015/09/03/the-whys-and-hows-of-generations-research/>

- Prokos, A., & Keene, J. (2012). The life course and cumulative disadvantage: Poverty among grandmother-headed families. *Research on Aging, 34*(5), 592–621.
- Rickards, T., & Wuest, J. (2006). The process of losing and regaining credibility when coming-out at midlife. *Health Care for Women International, 27*(6), 530–547.
- Rosenfeld, D. (2003). *The changing of the guard: lesbian and gay elders, identity, and social change* / Dana Rosenfeld. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003.
- Sasser, A. (2006). Impact of coming out in midlife on privilege and stigma. *Division 44 Newsletter, 22*(3), 18–19.
- Seidman, S. (2002). *Beyond the closet: The transformation of gay and lesbian life* / Steven Seidman. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Services and Advocacy for GLBT Elders (SAGE) & LGBT Movement Advancement Project (MAP). (2010, March). Improving the lives of LGBT older adults.
- Settersten, R. A., Jr. (2003). Propositions and controversies in life-course scholarship. In R. Settersten (Ed.), *Invitation to the life course* (pp. 15–45). Amityville, New York: Baywood Publishing Company, Inc.
- Settersten, Jr., R. A. (2015). Relationships in time and the life course: The significance of linked lives. *Research in Human Development, 12*, 217–223.  
<http://doi.org/10.1080/15427609.2015.1071944>
- Settersten, R. A., Jr., & Hagestad, G. O. (1996). What's the Latest? Cultural Age Deadlines for Family Transitions. *Gerontologist, 36*(2), 178–88.

- Shankle, M. D., Maxwell, C. A., Katzman, E. S., & Landers, S. (2003). An invisible population: Older lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals. *Clinical Research & Regulatory Affairs*, 20(2), 159.
- Stacey, J., & Biblarz, T. J. (2001). (How) does the sexual orientation of parents matter? *American Sociological Review*, 66(2), 159–183.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, California: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Strommen, E. (1989). Hidden branches and growing pains: Homosexuality and the family tree. *Marriage & Family Review*, 14(3-4), 9–34.
- Tasker, F., Barrett, H., & De Simone, F. (2010). “Coming out tales”: Adult sons and daughters’ feelings about their gay father’s sexual identity. *ANZJFT Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, 31(4), 326–337.
- Tester, G. (2012). Becoming invisible in community: Old gay men’s attachment to a local gay community. Presented at the American Sociological Association Annual Meeting, Denver, CO. Retrieved from [http://research.allacademic.com/one/www/www/index.php?cmd=www\\_search&offset=0&limit=5&multi\\_search\\_search\\_mode=publication&multi\\_search\\_publication\\_fulltext\\_mod=fulltext&textfield\\_submit=true&search\\_module=multi\\_search&search=Search&search\\_field=title\\_idx&fulltext\\_search=Becoming+Invisible+in+Community%3A+Old+Gay+Men%27s+Attachment+to+a+Local+Gay+Community](http://research.allacademic.com/one/www/www/index.php?cmd=www_search&offset=0&limit=5&multi_search_search_mode=publication&multi_search_publication_fulltext_mod=fulltext&textfield_submit=true&search_module=multi_search&search=Search&search_field=title_idx&fulltext_search=Becoming+Invisible+in+Community%3A+Old+Gay+Men%27s+Attachment+to+a+Local+Gay+Community)
- Tornello, S. L., & Patterson, C. J. (2012). Gay fathers in mixed-orientation relationships: Experiences of those who stay in their marriages and of those who leave. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 8(1), 85–98.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (1998, June). Informal caregiving: Compassion in action. Retrieved from [aspe.hhs.gov/daltcp/reports/carebro2.pdf](http://aspe.hhs.gov/daltcp/reports/carebro2.pdf)

Weston, K. (1991). *Families we choose: Lesbians, gays, kinship*. New York: Columbia University Press

Wight, R., LeBlanc, A., de Vries, & Detels, R. (2012). Stress and mental health among midlife and older gay-identified men. *American Journal of Public Health, 102*(3), 503–510.  
doi:10.2105/AJPH.2011.300384

## APPENDICIES

### Appendix A: Interview Guide

#### Interview Guide

**Written Consent:** Before beginning the interview, written consent by the interviewee will be obtained. The consent form used will be a form as approved by the Georgia State University Institutional Review Board for this research project. The interviewer will explain key points of the consent form including: 1) the interviewee's right to refuse to answer any question without any explanation for declining to answer the question. 2) the interviewee's right to request that portions of the interview not be recorded without explanation. 3) the interviewee's right to end the interview at any point without explanation. 4) how the privacy of the interviewee and the confidentiality of the interview will be protected and to whom knowledge of the interviewee and the interview itself is available.

**Preliminaries:** After obtaining written consent, the interviewer will go over the steps of the interview with the interviewee including: 1) the recording of an opening statement which will include interviewee's oral consent to the interview and confirmation of interviewee's name and age. 2) the demographic survey. 3) the semi-structured interview. 4) the opportunity at the end of the interview for the interviewee to add any other information, comments, or reflections they might have.

**Recording Opening Script:** (Start recorder after informing the Interviewee that you are doing so) *This is (researcher's full name) of the Georgia State University Gerontology Institute. It is (date). With me today is (Interviewee's full name). We are at (place). We are here today to talk about \_\_\_\_\_'s life and personal experiences of coming out.*

(Researcher addressing Interviewee) *“Before we begin do I have your permission to record this interview?”* (If “Yes”, proceed with the interview. If “No”, stop the recording and thank the interviewee for their time.).

(Researcher addressing Interviewee) *“Would you please state your name and your age?”*

### **Demographic Survey:**

(Researcher addressing Interviewee) *I would like to collect some general background information about you:*

**Please circle *one* number response for each question below and fill in the blanks where appropriate.**

**1. What is your gender?**

- 1 Female
- 2 Male
- 3 Other: \_\_\_\_\_

998 Refused

999 Don't know

**2. Are you of Hispanic or Latino origin?**

1 Yes

0 No

-----

998 Refused

999 Don't know

**3. What do you consider your race?**

1 Black or African American

2 White or European American

3 Asian or Asian American

4 American Indian

5 Mixed or multiple races

6 Other \_\_\_\_\_

-----

998 Refused

999 Don't know

**4. What was your age on your last birthday?**

\_\_\_\_\_ Total years

-----

998 Refused

999 Don't know

**5. Are you legally married, in a domestic partnership, separated, divorced, widowed, or have you never been married?**

- 1 Legally married
- 2 Domestic partnership
- 2 Separated
- 3 Divorced
- 4 Widowed
- 5 Never married
- 6 Other

-----

- 998 Refused
- 999 Don't know

**6. Do you live by yourself, with a spouse, domestic partner, or significant other, with a friend or roommate, with minor children, with adult children, or your parent(s)?**

- 1 By yourself
- 2 Spouse, domestic partner, or significant other
- 3 Friend or roommate
- 4 Minor children
- 5 Adult children
- 6 Parent(s)
- 7 Other

-----

- 998 Refused
- 999 Don't know

**7. What is your highest educational level?**

- 1 Less than High School
- 2 High School Graduate
- 3 Some College
- 4 College Graduate
- 5 Post Graduate

-----

- 998 Refused
- 999 Don't know



**8. What is your yearly income?**

- |    |                     |
|----|---------------------|
| 1  | Less than \$15,000  |
| 2  | \$15,000 - \$24,999 |
| 3  | \$25,000 - \$34,999 |
| 4  | \$35,000 - \$44,999 |
| 5  | \$45,000 - \$54,999 |
| 6  | \$55,000 - \$64,999 |
| 7  | \$65,000 - \$74,999 |
| 8  | \$75,000 - \$84,999 |
| 9  | \$85,000 - \$94,999 |
| 10 | \$95,000 or more    |

-----

- |     |            |
|-----|------------|
| 998 | Refused    |
| 999 | Don't know |

**9. What is your source of income? (Please choose all that apply)**

- 1 Paid work
- 2 Spouse's/Partner's paid work
- 3 Pension from employer
- 4 Retirement savings
- 5 SSI – Disability
- 6 Social Security
- 7 Other investments
- 8 Other sources

-----

- 998 Refused
- 999 Don't know

**10. What is your religious affiliation?**

- 1 Protestant
- 2 Catholic
- 3 Jewish
- 4 Muslim
- 5 Other
- 6 None

-----

- 998 Refused
- 999 Don't know

**11. What is your sexual orientation?**

- 1 Gay male
- 2 Lesbian
- 3 Other: \_\_\_\_\_

998 Refused

999 Don't know

**12. What was your age when you first came out (disclosed your sexual orientation) to someone with whom you felt close or who was important to you?**

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

998 Refused

999 Don't know

**Semi-structured Interview:****1. Background:**

- 1.1) Please tell me about your background, where you grew up, what your life was like growing up, what events were important to you.

Possible Probes:

- What were you parents like?
- Siblings?
- How did your parents and you get along?
- What was school like?
- Who were your friends?
- What did you do for fun?
- Leaving home
- College and early career

- 1.2) Please tell me about your life as an adult before you began the coming out process.

Possible Probes:

- What seemed most important to you then?
- What was going on in your life, such as career, family, romantic relationships, friendships, hobbies?
- What were some turning points or significant events for you then?
- Please tell me about your life as an adult in your thirties or forties.
- Please tell me about your life as an adult in your fifties or sixties.

## **2. Your Social Network Before Coming Out:**

(introduce network diagram found at end of interview as a prompt)

- 2.1) Before you came out, who were the people that were closest to you and why did you feel close to them?

### Possible Probes:

- Family, friends, colleagues, mentors?
- What brought you together?
- What did you do together?

- 2.2) Before you came out, who was important to you, but not necessarily closest to you, and why did you feel they were important in your life?

### Possible Probes:

- Family, friends, colleagues, mentors?
- What brought you together?
- What did you do together?

- 2.3) Before you came out, who were some people that you considered to be in your personal network, but not necessarily very important or very close to you, and why did you feel they were part of your personal network?

Possible Probes:

- Part of a larger ethnic/ancestral/religious community?
- How did you know each other?
- What brought you together?
- What did you do together?

- 2.4) Please talk about any larger community with which you identified before you came out.

Possible Probes:

- Religious, ethnic, ancestral, social, professional?
- What brought you to this community?
- How did being part of this community make you feel?

### **3. Coming Out:**

3.1) Why did you come out/start coming out when you did?

Possible Probes:

- Were you outed by someone? Who? What happened?
- Did you try to come out to someone and then decided against it?

3.2) To whom did you first come out and why?

3.3) How did those you named as close to you before you came out react when you came out?

3.4) How did those you named as important to you, but not necessarily closest to you before you came out react when you came out?

3.5) How did those you named as within your personal network, but not necessarily very important to you or very close to you before you came out react when you came out?

3.5) How did your relationship with the larger community with which you identified change or not change when you came out?

3.6) Reflecting on the process of coming out, how did you feel when you first began the process of coming out?

#### **4. Your Social Network Today:**

(introduce network diagram at end of interview guide as a prompt)

4.1) Who is closest to you now and why do you feel close to them?

Possible Probes:

- Family, friends, colleagues, mentors?
- What has brought you together?
- What do you do together?

4.2) Who is important to you now, but not necessarily closest to you, and why do you feel they are important in your life?

Possible Probes:

- Family, friends, colleagues, mentors?
- What has brought you together?
- What do you do together?

4.3) Who are some people that you consider to be in your personal network, but not necessarily very important or very close to you, and why do you feel they are part of your personal network?

Possible Probes:

- Part of a larger ethnic/ancestral/religious community?
- How do you know each other?
- What has brought you together?
- What do you do together?



4.4) Please tell me about a larger community with which you now identify, if any.

Possible Probes:

- Religious, ethnic, ancestral, social, professional?
- What brought you to this community?
- How does being part of this community make you feel?

4.5) Given your current social network and the larger community of which you are part, how do you envision your social network in the future?

Possible Probes:

- What needs will it fulfill?
- How might it change?

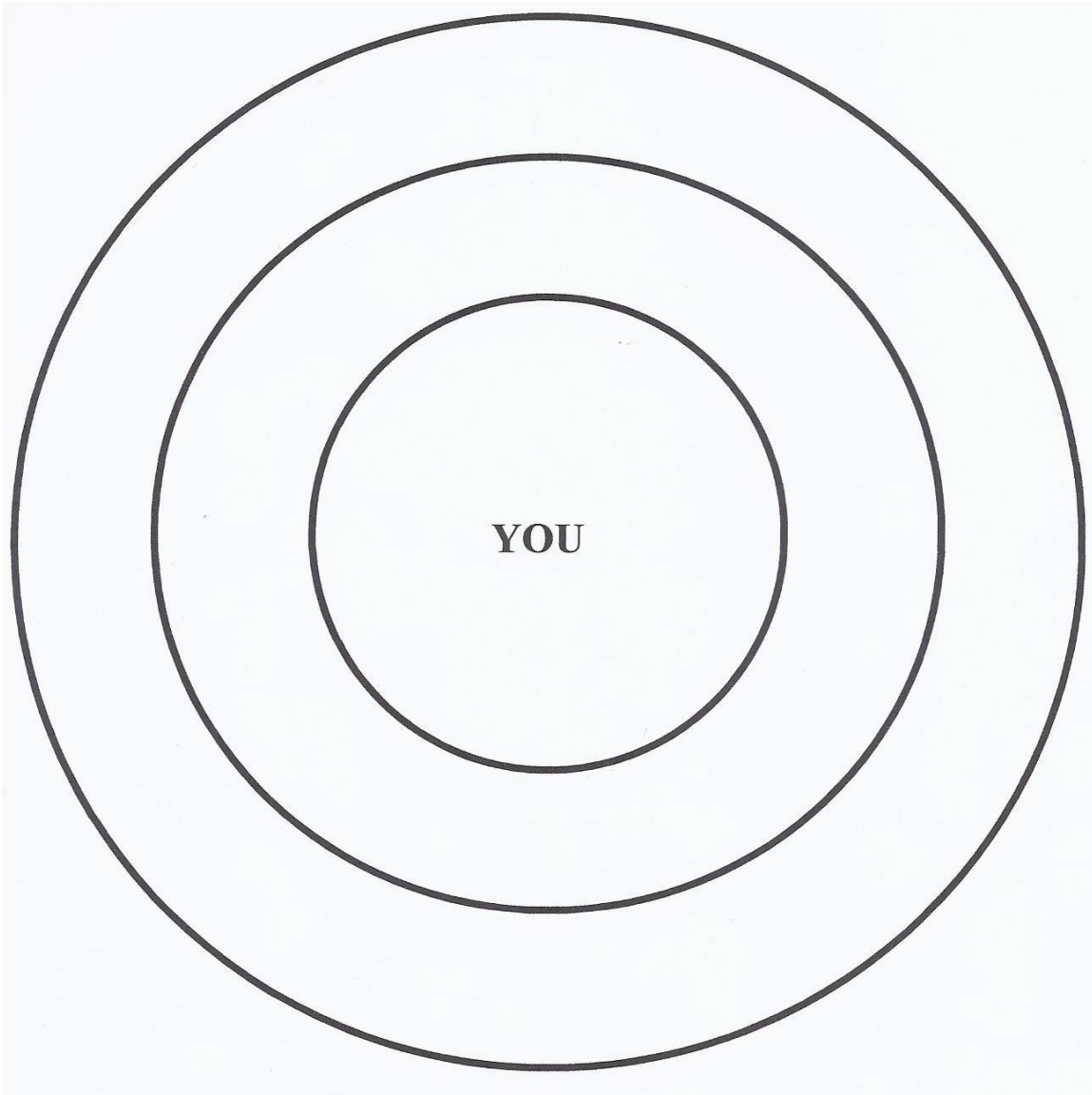
**5. Reflections:** (the following questions adapted from Breshears, (2011))

- 5.1) How do you think the timing of your coming out made your life different from gays or lesbians who came out at an earlier age?
- 5.2) What do you want other people to know about your life, your family, your friendships?
- 5.3) What advice would you give to others when they come out at mid- or later life?
- 5.4) Do you have anything you would like to add to our discussion today?

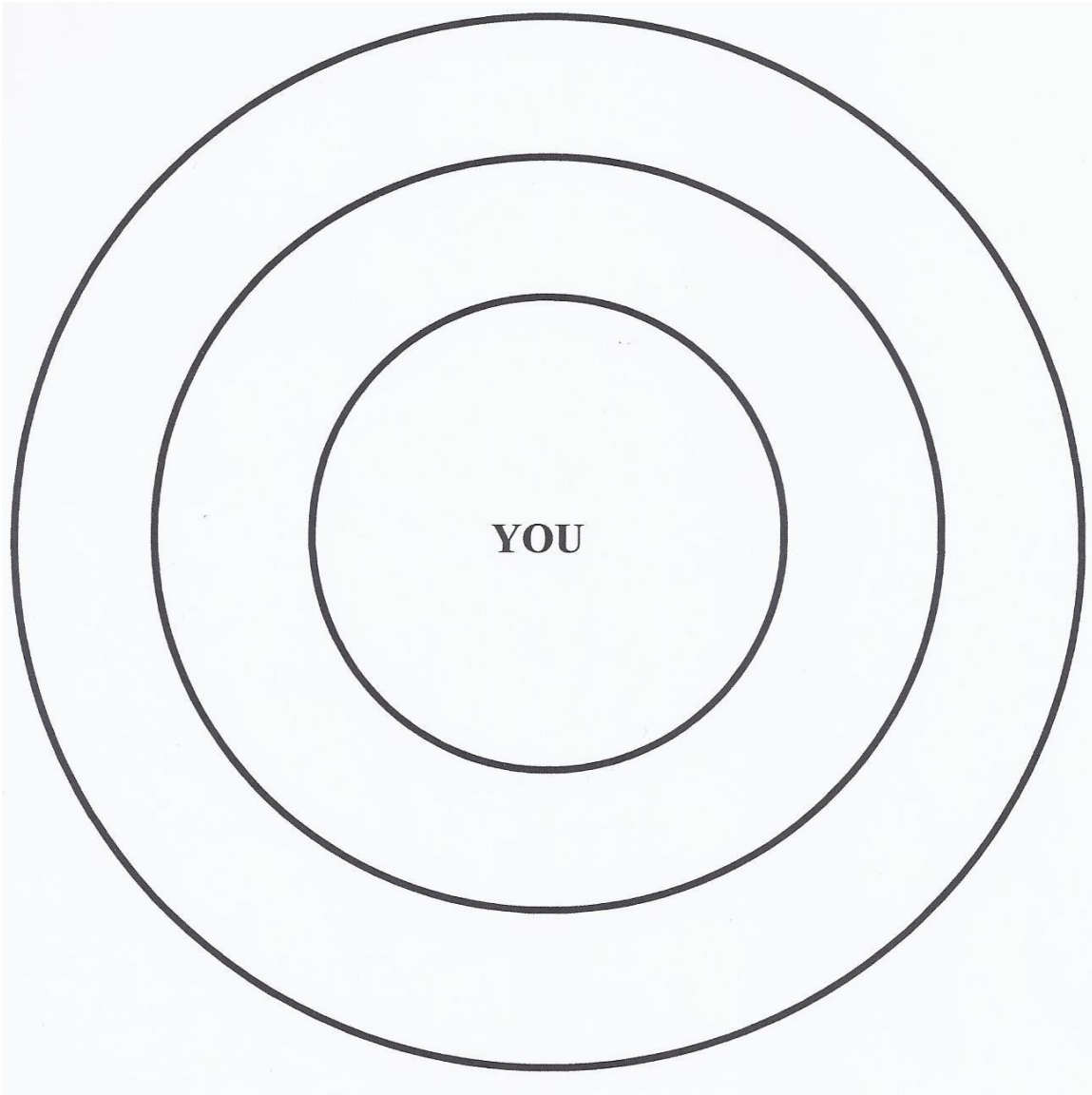
**Closing Script:** *Thank you! That brings us to the end of the questions. As we wrap up, if you do not mind, I would like to leave the recorders running, as experience has taught me that some of the most profound are said as we close...Thanks again for time and your willingness to talk about some very personal issues! If you ever have any questions regarding this interview or the*

*study please feel free to contact me. Again, I really appreciate your time and thank you for participating in this research!*

**Your Social Network Before the Coming Out Process**



**Your Social Network Today**



## Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Georgia State University  
Gerontology Institute

### Informed Consent Form: Participant Interview

**Title:** Coming Out Late: The Impact on Individuals' Social Networks

**Principal Investigator:** Candace L. Kemp

**Co-Investigators:** Elisabeth O. Burgess & Jennifer Craft-Morgan

**Student Principal Investigator:** Russell E. Spornberger

I. Purpose:

You are invited to join a research study. The study is about social support networks of those who came out later in life. Study participants are lesbian women or gay men. Study participants came out at age 40 or later. Sixteen (16) persons will be recruited for this study. Participation will require about 2 hours and 15 minutes of your time.

II. Procedures:

If you choose to participate, you will be interviewed once. The interview will last around 2 hours. The interview will be like a conversation. The interview will be audio-recorded. You will be asked about your life story. You will be asked about your coming out experience. You will be asked questions about your relationships with family and friends. After the interview, the researcher may contact you to clarify information. This contact will be as brief as possible (no more than 15 minutes) and not be recorded.

III. Risks:

Participation in this study may cause emotional upset. You do not have to answer any question that you do not want to answer. If you become upset, the researcher can refer you to a mental health provider. Georgia State University (GSU) has not set aside funds to pay for this care.

IV. Benefits:

Being in this study may or may not benefit you. Talking about your life with another person might make you feel better. The study will gain information about individuals who came out later in life. The study will gain information about the impact coming out later in life has had on their personal relationships.

V. Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal:

Participation in this research is voluntary. You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time. Whatever you decide, you will not lose any

benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

VI. Confidentiality:

We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. The following people will have access to the information you provide:

- Candace L. Kemp,
- Other members of the research team
- The GSU Institutional Review Board, Office for Human Research Protection.

A number rather than your name will be used on study records. The information you provide will be stored in locked filing cabinets. The filing cabinets will be located in a locked office. The locked office will be located at GSU. Records stored on computers will be protected by passwords. The list with your name and your number will not be stored with other information about you. When the study is completed, this list will be destroyed. When the study is completed, all interview files will be destroyed. Your name will not be published. Information that might disclose you will not be published. You will not be identified personally.

VII. Georgia State University Disclaimer:

If you become upset, a researcher can refer you to a mental health provider. Georgia State University has not set aside funds to pay for this care.

VIII. Contact Persons:

If you have any concerns or questions about the study, contact Candace L. Kemp at 404-413-5216 or [ckemp@gsu.edu](mailto:ckemp@gsu.edu).

If you want to talk to someone who is not part of the study team, contact Susan Vogtner in the Georgia State University Office of Research Integrity at 404-413-3513 or [svogtner1@gsu.edu](mailto:svogtner1@gsu.edu). You can talk about questions, concerns, offer input, obtain information, or make suggestions about the study. You can also call Susan Vogtner if you have questions or concerns about your rights in this study.

IX. Copy of Consent form to Subject:

We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep.

If you are willing to volunteer for this research and be audio recorded, please sign below.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Principal Investigator or Researcher Obtaining Consent Date

## Appendix C: Participant Recruitment Information Sheet

### Coming Out Late: The Impact on Individuals' Social Networks

A research project by

Russell Spornberger

Gerontology Institute, Georgia State University

P.O. Box 3984, Atlanta, GA 30302-3984

E-mail: [rspornberger1@student.gsu.edu](mailto:rspornberger1@student.gsu.edu)

Phone: 404-202-5363

#### ABSTRACT

Much research has been devoted to the process and impact of coming out on adolescents and young adults. Little attention has been specifically to those who come out later in life. The disclosure of one's gay/lesbian identity at mid- or later life has great potential for disrupting, if not destroying, existing family and other social relationships. The proposed study is exploratory in nature seeking to gain insight into the lives of those who came out at mid- or later life and the impact coming out has had on their social support networks. It is hoped that the proposed study will add to the existing literature on the older lesbian/gay population, spawn further research on coming out late in life, and inform policy and program development for older gay and lesbian individuals.

## Appendix D: Code Book

<b>Coming Out Late Study Codes</b>	
<b>Code</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Participant</b>	Participant code. Any transcripts or fieldnotes about a participant will be coded to that participant in their entirety.
<b>Background</b>	
<i>Background:</i>	Any description circumstances of birth, background, childhood, and growing up.
<i>Parents/Guardian:</i>	Any description of parents or guardians including their background, education, career, religiosity, health, parenting style and/or quality of relationship with participant, particularly any references to how parent/guardian attitudes and beliefs shaped/influenced participant's attitudes and beliefs.
<i>Siblings:</i>	Any description of participant's siblings including how they related to each other growing up, particularly any references to how siblings' attitudes and beliefs shaped/influenced participant's attitudes and beliefs.
<i>Friends/Classmates:</i>	Any description of participant's childhood/adolescent friends and classmates including how they related to each other growing up, particularly any references to how friends'/classmates' attitudes and beliefs shaped/influenced participant's attitudes and beliefs.
<i>Teachers/Mentors:</i>	Any description of individuals the participant particularly admired (or not). This might include teachers and other authority figures, aunts, uncles, grandparents, older children, peers, and so on, particularly any references to how such individuals' attitudes and beliefs shaped/influenced participant's attitudes and beliefs. .
<i>Schooling:</i>	Any description of schooling as a child/adolescent particularly teachings that shaped/influenced attitudes and beliefs.
<i>Religiosity:</i>	Any description of participant's religious upbringing and experiences, particularly how religion shaped/influenced attitudes and beliefs.
<i>Work:</i>	Any description of work or labor as a child/adolescent, paid or unpaid, particularly any references of how work shaped participant's attitudes and beliefs.
<i>Life Changing Events:</i>	Any description of a life changing event during childhood or adolescence, particularly any such event a participant describes as important or essential, a turning point.
<b>Life Before</b>	
<i>Life Before</i>	Any description of life as a young adult before beginning the coming out process including education, career, romance, friendships, family relations, social life, religious affiliation/activities, hobbies and pleasurable pursuits, emotional life, and so on



<b>Social Network Before</b>	
<i>Those Closest Before</i>	Any description of those closest or most important relationships to the participant before beginning the coming out process including why the relationship was most important or close.
<i>Close But Not Most Important Before</i>	Any description of those close but less important relationships to the participant before beginning the coming out process including why the relationship was important to the participant.
<i>Within Social Network Before</i>	Any description of those within one's social network but not very close or important to the participant before beginning the coming out process including what brought them together.
<i>Larger Community Before</i>	Any description of belonging/connection to a larger community (social, ethnic, religious) before beginning the coming out process including why identification with the particular larger community was important to the participant.
<b>Coming Out:</b>	
<i>Timing of Disclosure</i>	Any explanation, rationale for coming out/beginning the coming out process when the participant did.
<i>First Came Out to...</i>	Any description of the first persons(s) that participant disclosed their true sexual orientation including reasons why the particular person was important or instrumental including instances of being "outed" by another.
<i>Reactions of Those Closest</i>	Any descriptions of the reactions of those the participant felt were most close or most important to them at the time of disclosure, particularly reactions that changed such relationships for better or worse.
<i>Reactions of Those Close</i>	Any descriptions of the reactions of those the participant felt were close or important to them but not necessarily their closest or most important relations at the time of disclosure, particularly reactions that changed such relationships for better or worse.
<i>Reactions of Those in Social Network</i>	Any descriptions of the reactions of those the participant felt were within their social network but not necessarily closest or important relations at the time of disclosure, particularly reactions that changed such relationships for better or worse.
<i>Reactions in Larger Community</i>	Any descriptions of changes in the participant's relationship to a larger community (social, ethnic, religious) at the time of disclosure, particularly reactions that changed the participant's relationships within such communities for better or worse.
<i>How Did You Feel Then?</i>	Any description of the participant's thoughts/feelings/emotions when they first came out/began the coming out process.
<i>Life After</i>	Any description of life after coming out including romance, changes in lifestyle, employment, residence, and so on.
<i>Coming Out Process</i>	Any references to a continuing process of coming out as one navigates the social world encountering old and new relationships.
<i>Choosing to Disclose or Not</i>	Any reference or explanations of choices to disclose or not disclose in certain situations, with certain people whether by manner or speech, covert or overt.

<b>Social Network Now:</b>	
<i>Those Closest Now</i>	Any description of those closest or most important relationships to the participant today including why the relationship is most important or close.
<i>Close But Not Most Important Now</i>	Any description of those close but less important relationships to the participant today including why the relationship is important or close.
<i>Within Personal Network Now</i>	Any description of those within one's social network but not very close or important to the participant today including what brought them together.
<i>Larger Community Now</i>	Any description of belonging/connection to a larger community (social, ethnic, religious) today including why identification with the particular larger community is important to the participant.
<i>The Future</i>	Any description of how the participant envisions their social network in the future including how and why their social network may or may not change.
<b>Reflections:</b>	
<i>Has Age of Coming Out Made a Difference?</i>	Any of the participant's thoughts on how coming out at mid- or later life has somehow made the participant's life different from that of gays and lesbians who came out earlier in life.
<i>What Do You Want Others to Know About Your Relationships?</i>	Any of the participant's thoughts on what they would like others to know about their life, family or relationships, particularly what they find meaningful or valuable.
<i>Advice or Lessons Learned</i>	Any of the participant's advice to others who might come out at mid- or later life or lessons the participant has learned from their own experience of coming out at mid- or later life.
<i>Any Other Thoughts?</i>	Any other thoughts the participant may have about the topic of coming out later in life or the study itself or anything the participant would like to add to the discussion that was not covered in the interview.
<b>Other:</b>	
<i>Ageism</i>	Any reference to ageism :incidents, attitudes, beliefs, and so on
<i>Homophobia, Others</i>	Any references to homophobia in others
<i>Homophobia; Internalized</i>	Any reference to internalized homophobia: actions, attitudes, beliefs, and so on.
<i>Homophobia, Systemic</i>	Any references to homophobic policies or practices of an institution or organization. Any references to homophobia endemic in society itself.
<i>Sexual Careers</i>	Any reference to a participant's sexual relationships of any type heterosexual, homosexual first experiences, sexual practices, sexual history, romantic relationships, sexual taboos
<i>"May-December" Relationships</i>	Any references to young-old relationships. Any attitudes and beliefs about young-old relationships expressed by participants.

<b><i>Religious Careers</i></b>	Any reference to a participant's religious affiliation including upbringing, education, degree and level of participation, changes in affiliation for whatever reason, changes in attitudes and beliefs
<b>Historical Contexts</b>	
<b><i>No Model</i></b>	Any reference by participants that there were no positive models of gay and lesbian individuals to emulate when they were young.
<b><i>Shoulds</i></b>	Any references participants make to normative "shoulds" that guided their early lives, for example. "You should get married" ; "You should have kids."; "You should go to college."
<b>Disclosure and Autonomy</b>	
<b><i>Disclosure and Autonomy</i></b>	Any references to participants disclosure practices, management of information regarding sexual orientation.