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Family Communication about Sex: A Qualitative Analysis of Gay and Lesbian Parents' Parent-Child Sex Communication

Allison Bonander
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, allisonbonander@gmail.com

FAMILY COMMUNICATION ABOUT SEX:

A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF GAY AND LESBIAN PARENTS'

PARENT-CHILD SEX COMMUNICATION

by

Allison Ronnau Bonander

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Allison Ronnau Bonander, Ph.D.

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Advisor: Jordan Soliz

As the number of same-sex parents creating families and raising children rises, the stigma surrounding parent-child sex communication (PCSC) remains constant. Parents serve as one of the primary sources of information regarding sex and sexuality to their children; however, gay and lesbian parent-child sex communication remains largely unstudied. Framed within grounded theory, the primary goal of this study is to investigate how gay and lesbian parents navigate and enact parent-child sex communication with their children. Through 22 in-depth interviews with gay and lesbian parents who have directly communicated about sex and sexuality with their children, the following four research questions were addressed: 1) How do same-sex parents understand and enact PCSC? 2) What topics and discourses are inherent within gay and lesbian parent PCSC? 3) How, if at all, do gay and lesbian parents discuss sexual orientation during PCSC? 4) How, if at all, do gay and lesbian parents converse with each other in preparation for PCSC? Participants discussed their experiences engaging in and enacting PCSC with their children providing a unique standpoint in gay and lesbian specific PCSC. Discussion of the findings are discussed in relation to the similarities of gay and lesbian specific PCSC and extant literature regarding heterosexual parent PCSC, the unique experiences of gay and lesbian parents during PCSC, and finally how gay and lesbian parent PCSC can further inform all PCSC research. Directions for future research are also addressed.

Keywords: Gay and Lesbian Parents, Parent Child Sex Communication, Sex Education

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family – in every sense of the definition.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

Chapter One: Rationale for Study

The 2010 United States Census indicates that more than 111,000 households consist of children raised by same-sex guardians; resulting in over 220,000 biological, adopted, or step children under the age of 18 being raised by two same-sex parents (Gates, 2013). As many as six million American adults and children, or 2% of the total United States population, have at least one LGBT parent. A specific statistic regarding how many gay and lesbian headed families are within the United States is difficult to come by. Lambert (2005) explains many gay and lesbian parents do not officially disclose their sexual identity for fear they could lose custody or legal rights regarding their children as a result of their sexual orientation. However, broad estimates regarding the number of gay and lesbian families indicate the range of children being raised by gay or lesbian parents could be as high as 14 million (Patterson, 1995).

The majority of research on gay and lesbian parenting has focused predominantly on coparenting with heterosexual parents (e.g., Farr & Patterson, 2013), attitudes towards gay parenting (e.g., Pennington & Knight, 2011), and implications of gay and lesbian parenting on child's well-being (e.g. Goldberg & Smith, 2013; Reed, 2013; Vargas, Miller, & Chamberlain, 2012). The topics of research inquiry are broadening regarding gay and lesbian parenting. Yet, there are still numerous areas on LGBT parenting that are receiving minimal attention from family scholars compared to inquiries on opposite-sex parenting. One of these areas—and the focus of this proposal—is the nature of sexual communication gay and lesbian parents have with their children, as this focus of research remains wildly understudied.

All parents, regardless of sexual orientation, serve as one of the most constant and reoccurring sources of information for children regarding sex and sexual activity. The relationship between parents and children functions as a pivotal focal point for research regarding communication about sex. Parent's conversations with children regarding sex communication serves as a primary factor in children's understanding of sex, delaying of sexual debut, and a reduced risk that children will engage in risky sexual behavior (Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2012; Silk & Romero, 2014). Current research, however, has not focused specifically on how lesbian and gay parents approach sex communication with their children, as the majority of focus has been on heterosexual cross-sex parents and their children. As the number of children being raised by at least one LGBT parent continues to increase, the research surrounding sex communication has failed to highlight this growing population. Therefore, our understanding of the types of communication and messages surrounding parent-child sex communication does not currently account for any potential unique dynamics of gay and lesbian parenting.

Families, and specifically parents, serve as a critical part of a child's sexual education and the development of their sexual health (L'Engle & Jackson, 2008). In a nationwide survey, almost half of young adults surveyed indicated their parents were viewed as the most influential factor in their sexual education and decision-making (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2007). Beyond pragmatic sexual education, parent-child communication about sex offers parents the opportunity to convey information as well as moral beliefs, values, and expectations related to sexual behavior, activities, and identity (Jerman & Constantine, 2010). Parent-child sex communication provides many benefits to parent-child relationships, children's

participated risky sexual behavior, number of participants, and safe sex practices (Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2012). However, despite consistent findings indicating parents' communication with children regarding sexual activity and sexual education can benefit both parents, children, and responsible sexual activity, conversations surrounding the topic of sex, sexuality, and sexual activity can be extremely difficult to initiate.

Lack of knowledge, communicative skill, embarrassment, convenient timing, and confidence level are all factors that can hinder the initiation and process of parent-child sex communication (PCSC) (Elliot, 2010; Wilson, Dalberth, Koo, & Gard, 2010). For the purpose of this study, PCSC refers to any communication occurring between a parent and a child regarding sex, sexual orientation, or sexuality. Although many parents may want to communicate with their children about sex and sexuality, parents are often at a loss for how and when to begin and what specifically to say during these conversations. Research indicates that because of embarrassment and difficulty initiating these conversations, many parents rely on having the 'sex talk' with their children during a single planned conversation, rather than relying on multiple instances of communication regarding sex and relationships over time which can be a more comprehensive and effective approach to parent-child sex communication (Chia Chen Chen & Thompson, 2007; Martino et al., 2008).

Although the existing research consistently supports the claim that parents serve as a critical component in their children's sexual education, that parents can influence their child's sexual activity, and that parent-child sex communication heavily influences the sexual risks and sexual debut of their children, this research fails to identify how parent-child sex communication is specific and unique to gay and lesbian parents.

Current research regarding gay and lesbian families continues to grow; however, few scholars have investigated parent-child communication outside of parent's disclosure of homosexuality (Bozett, 1980; Clay, 1990). Bresearchs (2010) states "aspects of parental and family identity need to be discussed in these families in ways that differ from traditional families" (p. 80).

Scholarly work over the past three decades concludes children of gay and lesbian families do not differ from children raised in heterosexual-parented households in regard to sexual, emotional, social, and cognitive development (Tasker, 2005). Although research supports the positive health and wellbeing of children raised in homosexual-parented households, there is little research investigating how the communication acts between these same-sex parents and their children are unique. The majority of existing research regarding homosexuality and family identity focuses on the differences between these families and heterosexually headed households (Vyncke, Julien, Jodoin, & Jouvin, 2011).

Researchers investigating gay and lesbian families often do so by comparing these families to the existing research surrounding heterosexual family norms (Patterson, 2000). This form of comparative research does shed investigative light on the representation and commonalities of gay and lesbian headed families; however, comparing these unique family forms to heterosexual families ignores the nuances and specificities experienced by gay and lesbian families, thus limiting the scope of research (Lambert, 2005). Moreover, beyond simply limiting the scope of research, several scholars argue that the continued comparison of gay and lesbian headed families to heterosexual-headed families continues to promote heterocentricism and homophobia in

our research as well as our societal culture (Savin-Williams & Esterberg, 2000; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Because gay and lesbian parents simultaneously serve as a foundational figure in their children's sexual education and development, while potentially experiencing unique discourse related to their family structure, research must investigate how these same-sex parents navigate sex related conversations with their children.

The majority of existing research surrounding parent-child sex communication assumes both parents and children to be heterosexual based on the nature of questions, populations studied, or by the exclusion of non-heterosexual specific topics. By focusing this research specifically on same-sex parents and their navigation with their children through sex related conversations, we can broaden our understanding of what types of conversations are occurring within the broad scope of family structures in our culture. Furthermore, we can begin to stake a claim within our research that PCSC is not solely a heteronormative conversation, but a vastly complicated and under-researched field of inquiry in relation to sexual orientation and family composition. By expanding our understanding of PCSC and those engaging in it, we can get a better picture of sexual communication as it occurs between all types of families, parents, children, and people, rather than focusing on such a narrow aspect of a complex phenomenon.

Sociohistoric Context of Gay and Lesbian Parents

In order to comprehend the nuances of same-sex parents' parent-child sex communication, it is critical to first understand the social and historic context in which these conversations take place. Within the United States, gay and lesbian individuals have experienced a long and deeply rooted history of oppression during their fight for equality. Gay and lesbian headed families, similarly, may be faced with additional

hardships relating to negative outside opinion of homosexuality and family structure.

King and Black (1999) found negative perceptions of lesbian and gay parenting may be

apparent in the population of the United States at large. Herek and Garnets (2007)

propose that although the larger social attitudes within the United States are changing and

adapting to be more accepting of gay and lesbian parents, these individuals and their

family unites are still a widely stigmatized population. Similar to opinions about other

oppressed and marginalized groups, these opinions are often not a product of personal

experience, but rather a result of social and cultural transmission of stereotypes (Gillis,

1998). These stereotypes have been historically embedded in the research and

conversations regarding gay men and lesbian women. Previous to 1974, the American

Psychiatric Association had included homosexuality in the list of mental disorders

(American Psychiatric Association, 1974). Although there is no reliable research

indicating that homosexuality itself negatively affects psychological functioning, the

social construct of these stereotypes, along with systematic oppression and discrimination

itself, can cause an individual distress (Cochran, 2001; Meyer, 2003). In addition,

children of gay and lesbian headed households are not immune to the social prejudices

and opinions regarding homosexuality. Telingator and Patterson (2008) found children

of gay and lesbian parents often hear discriminatory or anti-gay messages in their daily

lives.

As a result of this discriminatory communication, researchers have investigated

how the general public opinion and attitudes within the United States about the morality

of homosexuality has changed throughout time. Loftus (2001) states the American

population's attitudes regarding homosexuality became briefly more liberal than in

previous years during 1973-1976, but was then followed by a fourteen-year stretch of more conservative attitudes from 1976-1990, and finally shifted toward a more liberal stance regarding homosexuality again between 1990 and 2001. Loftus suggests these findings are a result of the demographic changes within the United States as well as cultural and ideology shifts, stating this may be a result of increased education. Herek and Capitanio (1995) found individuals with higher education levels are more liberal in their attitudes regarding homosexuality. Thus, an increased acceptance towards homosexuals as well as more liberal ideology may be the result of increased education levels among general populations.

As Telingater and Patterson (2008) indicated, children of gay and lesbian parents hear discriminatory language and anti-homosexual messages every day. The comments and anti-gay conversations may be rooted within the long battled history of gay rights marriage within the United States. The issue of legalization of same-sex marriages has been a long and contested debate within the United States, but regained significant traction and visibility in the social conversation in response to the *Goodrich v. Department of Public Health* (2003), which officially legalized same-sex marriages in the state of Massachusetts. Public responses, largely led by the conservative religious voters, resulted in 11 states: Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Michigan, Mississippi, Montana, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Utah, to vote through amendments prohibiting same-sex marriages in their states in the 2004 November elections (Olson, Cadge, & Harrison, 2006). That same year, Congress reviewed resolutions intending to amend the U.S. Constitution to include only heterosexual couples as eligible for marriage recognition. In July of 2004, the United States Senate rejected the Federal Marriage

Amendment, although many voters and activists continued to push for the Amendment in the following years (Liu & Macedo, 2005).

Then, in June of 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the case of *United States v. Windsor* that section 3 of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which President Clinton put into place in 1996, was unconstitutional as it defined marriage and marital rights to be solely between a man and a woman. The Supreme Court based their decision on the grounds that DOMA violated the Fifth Amendment of the United States Constitution (Gaynor & Blessett, 2014).   Two years later, in June of 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court decided on a 5-4 decision that all 50 states must recognize same-sex marriages as legal, allowing gays and lesbians to marry and obtain federal recognition and legal benefits (Chappell, 2015). In addition, large strides have been made in the legislation regarding gay and lesbian individuals and couples adopting children.

Same-sex couples or homosexual individuals are currently allowed to adopt from private and gay-friendly adoption agencies. However, adopting from foster systems and individual state agencies is difficult. Individual states with adoption laws that allow adoption or fostering of children only by husband and wife limit the ability of single people and unmarried couples, regardless of sexual orientation, as well as homosexual couples to adopt or foster children from state foster systems. Prior to the 2013 Supreme Court decision making gay and lesbian marriages legal in all 50 states, there were 13 states that explicitly prohibited same-sex marriages: Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, Tennessee, and Texas. Of these 13 states, all but Arkansas and Tennessee

possessed additional laws making it illegal for same-sex partners to adopt foster children jointly (Beitsch, 2015).

In early 2016, a federal judge lifted the last remaining ban on gay parental adoption in Mississippi making adoption for gay and lesbian parents legal in all 50 states (Reilly, 2016). Large strides were made in regard to legislation of gay and lesbian individuals and family rights during the process of this project. It is important to note that although joint adoption from the state foster system is now legal across the United States, it was not legal for many states and participants during the time frame in which they were developing families. And while legal equality for same-sex families is starting to take shape one law at a time, many gay and lesbian individuals and couples continue face additional discriminations, social injustices, and legal obligations. These social, historical, and legal implications placed on gay and lesbian individuals create a significant lens in which to view, research, and begin to understand these unique experiences.

Understanding the social, legal, and historical obstacles facing gay and lesbian parents can influence our understanding of how gay and lesbian parents discuss sex education with their children. Enacting PCSC in tandem with the everyday nuances of being a gay or lesbian parent can create an environment in which ideologies of sex as well as sexuality can be discussed. Gay and lesbian PCSC is a distinct avenue in which to comprehend how, if at all, the current social climate allows parents to navigate topics of morality, liberalism, understanding, or oppressions unique to their lived experiences.

While this particular study focuses on communication between parents and their children regarding sexual communication, it is first important to understand the larger

networks of sex communication within American School systems. Previous research has shown that the vast majority of American parents want sex education to be taught in public school systems (Janus & Janus, 1993; Kenney, Guardado, & Brown, 1989). McKay, Pietrusiak, and Holowaty (1998) found that 95% of parents surveyed supported sex education within public schools. As the majority of parents are advocating for sex education within schools, it is vital to understand the nuances and inconsistencies within American public school sex education as part of the larger comprehensive sex education conversation.

Sex and sex education in American school systems. A majority of children may experience communication and education regarding sex from peers, family, and teachers or educational classes. Education and schooling environments are strongly linked to the developmental factors of the students inhabiting them. Ringeisen, Henderson and Hoagwood (2003) suggest schooling environments can affect mental health, self-concept, academic achievement, as well as the ability to form and maintain personal relationships. Although currently the United States public school sex education has been widely criticized for ignoring the unique experiences and health concerns of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students by privileging a heteronormative teaching criteria (Elia & Eliason, 2010; Wilson & Wiley, 2009), these heteronormative teaching practices also disproportionately hinder students from homosexually-headed households, regardless of the student's sexual orientation. By continuing a heteronormative approach towards sex education and disallowing or discouraging discussions of homosexuality, students are not only deprived of a comprehensive sex education, but are also receiving heteronormative messages regarding family structure.

In the case that educators are willing to teach on issues of lesbian, gay, and bisexual comprehensive sex education, many teachers lack the resources and knowledge to effectively address sexuality through education (Szalacha, 2004; Walter & Hayes, 2007). Macgillivray and Jennings (2011) found through a content analysis of education multicultural textbooks that the majority of content addressing lesbian and gay individuals represents homosexuals as perpetual victims, often excluding any positive references of homosexuality, and fails to properly discuss the distinction between gender identity and sexual orientation. McCarty-Caplan (2013) argues even when teachers intend to discuss sexual orientation within sex education, the training methods available for teachers remain underdeveloped and may result in perpetuating heteronormative rhetoric while pathologizing lesbian and gay individuals and families. Savage, Prout, and Chard (2004) found educators within their study self-reported as obtaining low to moderate levels of competency regarding any lesbian and gay specific issues. In addition, Mudrey and Medina-Adams' (2006) research found that 74% of teachers surveyed fell in the range of obtaining some homophobic attitudes prior to and during their time as educators.

With the lack of education and resources available for educators responsible for sex education within American classrooms, it must not be forgotten that there is no federal mandate for comprehensive sex education within public school systems in the United States (Starkman & Rajani, 2002). Currently only 22 states, as well as the District of Columbia, require public schools to teach sex education at all, and of those states only 19 require the information students receive be "medically, factually, or technically accurate" (State Policies on Sex Education in Schools, para. 3, 2015). With the

inconsistency in states receiving sex education, as well as the medical and factual accuracy of comprehensive sex education, there are currently three states with legislation in place requiring educators to negatively communicate about homosexuality specifically. For example, Alabama's current legislation requires sex educators in public schools to teach that homosexuality is an "unacceptable and criminal lifestyle" (Temblador, para. 1, 2015).

Although sex education within public school systems remains a largely utilized resource for many, this particular form of information broadly excludes gay, lesbian, and bisexual education; positive information and resources regarding sexuality; and, in some cases, medically accurate information in relation to sexual activity, sexually transmitted infections, and safe sex practices. This lack of regulation affects not only the lesbian, gay, and bisexual students within those classrooms, but those individuals who possess gay and lesbian family members as well. Thus, students who seek specific information regarding sexuality may be receiving inaccurate and negative information regarding homosexual lifestyles. Although there is no evidence that children of gay or lesbian parents are uncertain about their gender identity, nor any evidence to support the concept that gay and lesbian parents are more likely than heterosexual parents to raise homosexual children (Patterson, 2000), this lack of information and education regarding homosexual sex practices leaves out a portion of sexual activity from a comprehensive sex education. Children of gay and lesbian parents may be more aware of heteronormative attitudes, and thus, question the lack of representation in their sex education. Therefore, it is critical researchers investigate the conversations lesbian and

gay parents are having with their children regarding sexual orientation, homosexuality, and sex education in general in order to understand a larger picture of sex education.

Parent-Child Sex Communication

The purpose of this study is to examine more clearly the nuances and specific experiences of lesbian and gay parents as they communicate sex and sex conversations with their children. In this study, I use the term "child" rather than the often-utilized "adolescent," as the term "child" portrays a life-span relationship rather than a specific age group, as can be connoted from "adolescence." As parents often discuss varying depths and specifics of sex communication with children of differing age groups, the term "child" serves as a more realistic and appropriate relationship-based term for analysis. Similarly, definitions of "sex communication" vary across researchers and parents alike. Coffelt and Olson (2014) describe parent-child sexual communication as "verbal conversations about sex where a parent and child agree that they discussed a sexual topic" (p. 209). In addition, purposefully vague language and euphemisms are often used to avoid direct sexual language, but still allow for the creation of meaning surrounding a taboo or embarrassing conversation topic such as sex.

Warren (1995) argues nonverbal behaviors are an understudied and critical piece to understanding PCSC as nonverbal communication also inherently affects shared meaning and understanding. Therefore, this study serves to allow its participants to self-define what 'sex communication' means to them, as provided definitions may unintentionally limit or lead the scope of research. Within this chapter, I will provide an overview of previous research regarding sex education within school systems as well as heterosexual families, what we know about family communication in lesbian and gay

families, how sex and sexual communication is defined, as well as specific qualities found in PCSC. There are significant and important differences within lesbian and gay individuals. For example, previous research has found gay men experience higher levels of external stresses, such as verbal discrimination than lesbian and bisexual women (Dewaele, Van Houtte, & Vincke, 2014). Additionally, lesbian females report the highest levels of depression of any sexual minority (Gallieher, Rostosky, & Hughes, 2004). There are significant and important variations in understanding the lived experiences of gay and lesbian individuals. However, there are some similarities within the two populations. Primarily gay men and lesbian women share similar experiences in regards to minority stresses, visibility management, and sexual stigma (DeWaele, Van Houtte, & Vincke, 2014). Ultimately, while there are variations and unique aspects between gay men and lesbian women, both populations experience being a sexual minority, contemplate when and if to disclose their sexual orientation, and social stresses of the current social stigma surrounding nonheterosexuality. Thus, gay and lesbian parents provide a population of shared experiences in raising children while simultaneously navigating similar external stresses. Although the combined study of gay and lesbian parents provides similar experiences, the combination of all LGBT members within this study would be detrimental to the understanding of the unique and individual experiences of transgender and bisexual parents. I will briefly explain my decision to focus on gay and lesbian parents as opposed to the larger population that identifies within the LGBT umbrella.

Why Not Transgender or Bisexual Parents?

Although research regarding lesbian and gay families is beginning to grow, the research supporting the particular experiences of trans identities remains a unique area of inquiry deserving of undivided attention. Biblarz and Savci (2010) warn researchers of the danger of combing trans experiences into the larger group of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans (LGBT) experiences, advising that trans individuals possess distinct experiences apart from lesbian and gay individuals. The number of trans individuals who are also parents is growing; however, trans parenting involves a distinctive experience deserving of significant attention within the research focus. Ryan and Martin (2000) declare that although society has become increasingly more attentive and comfortable with the notion of gay and lesbian parenting, "heterosexuals can find the notion of a parent who has crossed gender lines deeply distressing" (p. 210). Beyond social critique of trans parenting, Hines (2006) argues families including a trans individual often transition with the trans person as family rules, roles, and expectations are renegotiated. Because trans individuals, as well as their families, may negotiate and renegotiate familial roles, as well as experience unique distinctions not directly applicable to gay and lesbian parents, this research will not include the investigation of trans parents in parent-child sex communication. However, this particular area of inquiry is worthy and deserving of investigation that can adequately articulate the intersectional identities of parenting and trans identity within family roles.

Although trans individuals experience a unique transition from one gendered or sexed presentation to another, bisexual individuals possess the ability to "pass" as heterosexual, or identify as homosexual. Lingel (2009) articulates the act of passing is

not inherently unique to the bisexual community; however, the ability to actively or passively assume membership of multiple communities allows bisexual individuals social privileges often awarded to heterosexual individuals. Further, Angelides (2001) wrote that "within the prevailing discourse of sexuality from sexology to gay liberation, bisexuality has functioned as the structural Other to sexual identity itself, that against and through which the identities of hetero- and homosexuality are constituted" (p. 193). Conceptually, bisexual individuals remain a specific and unique experience in which sexual orientation is not bound to gender or sex. Because of this unique positionality, bisexual parents are deliberately not included within the area of inquiry, as this study aims to investigate the PCSC patterns and experiences of solely gay and lesbian parents.

Lesbian and gay parent-child sex communication is vital to understand, and unfortunately largely understudied. However, previous research has resulted in a foundational understanding of heterosexual parent-child communication. Thus in order to understand what, if anything, is unique regarding lesbian and gay PCSC, a fundamental explanation of what is specific within heterosexual PCSC is necessary. Because the majority of research on PCSC focuses on heterosexual parents, this serves as the basis of our current knowledge of how parents communicate with their children regarding sex and sexuality.

Communication Regarding Sex and Sex Education

Previous research has provided a vast amount of investigation regarding how various populations of people communicate about sex and sex education. However, the majority of the existing research focuses on populations of heterosexual orientation.

Heterosexual parents. DiIorio, Pluhar, and Belcher (2003) report that 95 published studies from multiple disciplines have focused specifically on parent-child communication regarding sexuality since 1980. Coffelt and Olson (2014) argue that although there has not been a formal statistical meta-analysis performed on scholarship regarding parent-child communication about sex, a thorough review of the literature states that scholarship is focusing on the content of sexual disclosure and the frequency of the conversations, with very little research on discussion of sexual preferences, sexuality, and sex practices. Although significant strides in the amount of research have been conducted, the research findings have been inconsistent with regard to PCSC factors affecting a child's sexual debut as well as parent and child overall satisfaction with these conversations (Kirby, 1999; DiIorio et al., 2003). This inconsistency in results and discrepancies in findings serves as a cue for family scholars to continue to further investigate this topic of research.

Existing research indicates an adolescent's peers have an influence on the sexual decisions made by teenagers (Balalola, 2004; Maxwell, 2002; Miller, Kotchick, Dorsey, Forehand, & Ham, 1999). Although peers and friends provide an avenue for adolescents to receive information and messages regarding sexual activity, family members often serve a guiding source of information and moral opinion regarding sexual behavior. Feldman and Rosenthal (2000) argue parents are expected to be an active participant in the education of their children regarding sexual education, and parents are often suggested to be responsible for preparing their children for adult life, transferring and instilling values of morality, and increasing knowledge about sex in order to encourage responsible sexual practices (Holman, 2014).

Communication about sex is often embarrassing or uncomfortable for family members, resulting in some families avoiding the conversation altogether (Thompson, Yannessa, McGough, Dunn, & Duffy, 2015). Family topic avoidance in sexual communication leaves children to search for information elsewhere. Previous research on the PCSC has found families that do brave the conversation about sex often feel uncomfortable. Fox and Inazu (1980) found heterosexual mothers experienced more comfort and expressed a desire for more frequent conversations about sexual activity than their adolescent daughters. Additionally, mother-daughter dyads about sexual communication consisted of more words than conversations with mother-son dyads (Lefkowitz, Kahlbaugh, & Sigman, 1996). This mother-child dyad is a common form of PCSC, as many heterosexual parents rely heavily on the mother to communicate about sex, suggesting fathers often avoid the topic (Raffaelli & Greene, 2003).

When heterosexual fathers do engage in PCSC, they tend to focus on generalized topic areas and avoid specific details (Rosenthal, Senserrick & Feldman, 2001). Gendered stereotypes aligning with biological sex may be the result of this divide in sex communication labor within heterosexual parents. Heisler (2005) suggests cultural stereotypes attributed to women being the "relational experts" may encourage women to bear the responsibility of sex communication with sons and daughters alike. In Heisler's study, 176 mother-father-student triads reported more than 802 topics of discussion about sex. Within the families involved in the study, fewer than 13 reported having conversations about homosexuality at any point. Heterosexual families do not report discussing homosexuality much, if at all; however, there is some existing research on same-sex parents disclosing their sexual orientation to their children (e.g. Breshears,

2010). While the basis of previous research on PCSC revolves around heterosexual parents and their children, some studies have provided knowledge regarding family communication specific to gay and lesbian parents.

Gay and lesbian parents. Although the vast majority of research on PCSC has been conducted within heterosexual male-female married couples, there is a small window of insight into how lesbian and gay parents disclose their sexual orientation to their children. While Breshears' (2010) participants indicated having explicit and direct conversation with their children regarding their sexual identities, several participants had not yet explicitly discussed homosexuality with their children. These unique cases stressed the importance of normalizing their same-sex relationships to their children rather than directly expressing it. Normalizing their relationships includes introducing partners and stressing family expectations and structure similar to heterosexual headed families.

A large amount of research regarding LGBTQ parents surrounds lesbian mothers. The explosion of this type of research, starting in the late 1980s and lasting through the 1990s, was largely a result of the academic urge to provide evidence advocating for same-sex parental rights, as many lesbian mothers were losing custody battles with their children. Work from Tasker and Golombok (1991) examined the emotional attachment of young children to their parents in heterosexual homes and in lesbian homes. Tasker and Golombok's (1991) concluded there was no deductive evidence indicating any psychological hazards of lesbian parenting on children.

Mitchell's (1998) research investigated the conversations lesbian mothers had with their children regarding reproductive-specific sex questions. Mitchell's qualitative

interviews reported lesbian mothers specifically were fielding questions from their children regarding physical anatomy and reproductive processes. Lesbian mothers in Mitchell's study also reported unique experiences of supporting their children, as they grew weary of reminding friends and support groups of their heteronormative language that excluded their family units. Additionally, this study signified stages of sexual orientation communication throughout age groups of children. Often parents reported being asked if their family identity and sexual orientation inferred that the children would grow up to participate in a lesbian or gay relationship as well. Although Mitchell's study set out to investigate how lesbian mothers communicate about sex, sexual activity was not a predominant discussion in their interviews.

While there is some limited research regarding lesbian parenting, the amount of sex education research prevalent in the field surrounding gay fathers is further insufficient. The limited research surrounding gay male fathers indicates similar positive evidence supporting same-sex parenting abilities. For example, although many fathers fear losing their parental rights due to traditional maternal roles supported by multiple legislative systems, Bigner (1996) states that "although there are exceptions, most children do not reject their father upon disclosure of his sexual orientation" (p. 377). Instead, the parent child relationship is often closer after the paternal coming out narrative, as the act of disclosing itself is an honest and self-disclosing act shared with another individual out of respect and confidence (Robinson & Barret, 1986).

Although research supports the ability of positive self and familial relationships when same-sex parents disclose their sexual identity to their children, we are still left to question the implications of not disclosing homosexual sexual orientation to children.

Murray and McClintock (2005) argue internalized negative feelings towards homosexuality are greatly reduced during the communicative process of sharing the information indicating homosexuality. By releasing the information and no longer harboring the secret, or remaining in the closet, individuals are likely to be relieved of negative perceptions of self derived from discrimination about gay individuals in American culture. The researchers also indicate that if this information is not shared or released within an appropriate amount of time, homosexual individuals may be at risk of harboring negative self-images, remaining in the closet, and increasing self-resentment.

Murray and McClintock (2005) researched children of LGBTQ parents who were raised under the assumption that both their parents were heterosexual until the children were at least eleven years of age. After eleven years of age all of the participants indicated that at least one of their parents came out of the closet and participated in a coming out narrative directly with the children. They tested for variances in self-esteem, anxiety, and internalized homophobia within the participants. The results of the study indicated no significant variances in child's self-esteem, anxiety, or internalized homophobia once the parent participated in the coming out narrative with them. It is, however, important to note that in the study 45% of participants indicated there were some negative implications of their parents coming out as gay or lesbian to their children later in life after living a same-sex lifestyle. Although the design of the study does not allow for conclusive results as to why negative implications were perceived, this could be a result of changed parental perceptions after the parent identified as gay or lesbian.

Although research on gay and lesbian parents continues to grow, the majority of this research has been focused on comparative studies. Comparative studies serve a

necessary purpose in the comprehensive epistemology of understanding gay and lesbian individuals, as they often serve to disprove negative myths or stereotypes based on sexual orientation. Focusing solely on comparing heterosexual and homosexual individuals can leave out the nuanced topics within homosexual relationships. Peplau and Beals (2004) argue several topics of investigation warrant specific attention including how gay and lesbian couples talk to each other during conflict, intimate communication between partners and others, and relationship maintenance.

As homosexual sexual orientation and disclosure of sexual orientation to family members remains a unique experience of families headed by same-sex partners, a nuanced disclosure that heterosexual parents do not experience as deliberately, the concept that PCSC within gay or lesbian parents may be different from heterosexual-headed families in additional ways. Based on the existing research on same-sex parents, as well as the literature on heterosexual PCSC, I come to question what, if anything, makes same-sex parents a unique population for PCSC.

Why Same-Sex Parent Communication May Differ from Heterosexual Parent Communication

The very structure of a family, whether it is intact, single parent, or blended, can affect and influence sexual behaviors in children during adolescent years (Wight et al., 2006). Literature in PCSC research outlines the difference between male and female parents and their communication about sex with their children. Biological sex of both the parent and the child predicts the likelihood of topics, length, and depth of conversations about sex. Additionally, gendered expectations, roles, and differences accompany sex conversations. Coffelt and Olson (2014) argue gender overwhelmingly impacts the

regulation of sex conversation to traditional same-sex parent-child dyads. Current literature yields a heteronormative approach to PCSC in topics, as well as populations. As gender and sex play an integral role in the topics discussed and frequencies of PCSC, sexual orientation remains largely unexamined.

In 1998, Chan, Brooks, Raboy, and Patterson examined 30 lesbian couples as well as 16 heterosexual couples, all of whom used anonymous donor insemination to start their families. Within this study, the researchers found that comparatively there was no difference between lesbian couples and heterosexual couples in their division of paid employment, housework, and decision-making. However, lesbian couples within the study reported more equal division of child-care tasks than heterosexual couples. Along similar lines, McPherson (1993) found gay male parents also indicated a more even distribution of childcare responsibilities than heterosexual couples.

Based upon the societal expectations of gendered division of labor within heterosexual couples, the implications of how, when, and who discusses sexual communication with children in lesbian and gay parents is currently unstudied. As the majority of heterosexual couples follow traditional gendered role expectations on which biological sexed parent discusses sex communication with their children, how frequently they discuss it, and the topics discussed, a focus needs to be placed on how lesbian and gay parents divide this labor of PCSC. Peplau and Beals (2004) argue gay and lesbian parents must communicate with their children about potentially delicate issues such as conception, artificial insemination, surrogacy, adoption, or a parent's sexual orientation. Given the combination of additionally sensitive conversations, as well as the unknown and understudied division of labor, the conversations gay and lesbian parents participate

with their children during PCSC creates a gap in the current literature and understanding of sexual education as well as communication within gay and lesbian families.

With a review of current literature regarding sex education, heterosexual PCSC, and potentially unique aspects of gay and lesbian PCSC, there is clearly a gap in current research regarding how gay and lesbian parents navigate discussing particular topics to their children regarding sex and sexual communication. Within this project, I aim to investigate this gap in our current knowledge of gay and lesbian PCSC by proposing specific research questions within this area of inquiry.

Gay and lesbian parents offer unique and specific lived experiences. Understanding the lived experiences specific to gay and lesbian parent PCSC will offer a more cohesive and comprehensive understanding of sex education as well as gay and lesbian headed families. In order to better understand this specific communication phenomenon, I ask four specific research questions: 1) How do gay and lesbian parents enact and understand sex communication? 2) What topics and discourses are inherent within gay and lesbian parent PCSC? 3) How, if at all, do parents discuss sexual orientation during PCSC? 4) How do same-sex parents converse with one another in preparation for PCSC?

Parental Understanding and Enactment of Sex Communication

A significant portion of scholarship has been dedicated to understanding which behaviors and actions are defined in a way that constitutes "having sex" (e.g., Gute, Eshbaugh, & Wiersma, 2008; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). However, the vast majority of these studies focus on identifying what behaviors heterosexual participants define as "sex." One notable exception is the work of Hill, Rahman, Bright, and Sanders (2010),

who focused their study on how homosexual men in the United States and the United

Kingdom define sexual behavior. Hill et al. found that regardless of country, there was

no general consensus of the types of behaviors that indicated having "sex." Although this

work brings critical insight to the scientific field regarding the communicated definitions

of sexual behavior within a widely understudied population, the authors focus

predominantly on how defined "sex" and sexual activity influence and affect the

transition of HIV between homosexual men, a widely-studied topic regarding

homosexual males and sexual behavior.

Previous research indicates that definitions of sex and sexual activity are

ambiguous and flexible. Sewell and Strassberg (2015) suggest a methodological

rationale for the discrepancies in what varying participant populations identify as sex or

not. They argue previous research has allowed participants a binary answer bank from a

list of various sex acts, asking participants to identify which acts they constitute as "sex"

and those they do not. Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007) suggest this type of binary

methodological research insinuates that individuals obtain a clear definition of what

activities do and do not qualify as "sex," thus ignoring the situational, personal, and

relational factors that may influence definitions. In their work, Peterson and

Muehlenhard discovered nearly all of their participants identified sexual behaviors that

they classified as "not quite sex" or "unsure." This research calls for a more open-ended

approach to investigating various populations and their unique perspectives on what does

or does not qualify as "sex."

In addition, research presents mixed results as to whether or not a person's

personal sexual experience history impacts the types and variety of sexual activities they

define as sex. Sanders and Reinisch (1999) found that when participants had never previously participated in penile-vaginal intercourse, but had reported previously participating in genital-oral contact, they were far less likely to define genital-oral contact as "sex." More recent investigation of age as a variable within self-definitions of sexual behavior found men within the oldest and youngest participant groups, ranging in age from 18-96, were less likely to identify multiple behaviors as sex (Sanders et al., 2010). Other studies, however, suggest an individual's personal sexual experience and sexual activity history does not significantly influence their perception and categorization of sexual activity (Randall & Byers, 2003; Trotter & Alderson, 2007). Given the large inconsistencies within previous findings regarding how individuals define sex and the communication surrounding sex communication, further investigation is necessary.

Although the definition of the act of sex warrants further inquiry, how individuals identify specifically what constitutes "talking about sex," or sexual communication also justifies our critical attention. Defining the act of sex differs from defining communicating about sex. As innuendoes are often used to replace biological terms or to reduce embarrassment, the topics, phrases, and conversations regarding sexual communication are critical to understanding the larger picture of sex education and communication within PCSC. Identifying how same-sex parents define sex communication has been previously understudied as the majority of research regarding sex and sex communication remains studied on heterosexual individuals. Same-sex parents' understanding and enactment of PCSC is distinctly unique in comprehending how parents discuss types and forms of sexual behavior, family structure, and or sex beyond reproduction. As this unique population offers a critical insight to understanding

sex communication through specific experiences, the following research question is posed:

RQ1: How do same-sex parents understand and enact sex communication?

By specifically focusing on same-sex parents and their definition of sex communication, I aim to shed further insight into the often conflicting and vast amount of definitions of sex communication, as well as highlight any uniqueness within these definitions from an understudied population. Understanding how sex communication is defined will offer a broader understanding of how gay and lesbian parents communicate and what they value and identify as communication; however, understanding the specific themes and topics discussed within PCSC is also necessary in order to further identify communication within this phenomenon.

Topics of Discussion in Gay or Lesbian Parent-Child Sex Communication

As we identify the definition of sex communication, I must inquire as to what the specific themes are within gay and lesbian PCSC. In order to understand this, I will articulate the existing knowledge in frequency and topics in heterosexual PCSC, as well as potential barriers inherent with gay and lesbian PCSC.

Previous research indicates the more frequently parents discuss topics such as sex, birth control, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections with their children, the more likely these children are to have later dates of sexual debut and the less likely these children will be to engage in risky sexual behavior (Booth-Butterfield & Sidelinger, 1998; Miller, 2002). Gender and sex roles factor into the types of discussions parents have with their children and the topics discussed just as much as the biological sex of both parents and children affects these conversations. Adolescent children of both sexes

are more likely to discuss sexual conversations and topics with their mothers than their fathers (DiIorio, Kelley, & Hockenberry, 1999). Previous research also indicates female adolescents report more frequent conversations with parents of either sex than male adolescents (Raffaelli & Green 2003; Sneed, 2008; Dutra, Miller, & Forehand, 1999). Mothers and fathers report engaging in equal amounts of sexually-based conversations with their sons, although fathers talk to their daughters less frequently than mothers communicate PCSC to their female children (Wyckoff, Miller, Forehand, Fasula, Long, & Armistead, 2008).

Although the frequency of PCSC varies depending on the gender and sex of the parent as well as the child, the topics discussed during those conversations are also vastly different within various dyads of parent and child gender composition. Sneed, Somoza, Jones, and Alfaro (2014) found mother-daughter dyads were significantly more likely to discuss waiting until marriage than mother-son dyads or father-child dyads. These researchers also found father-daughter dyads were significantly more likely to discuss abstinence or avoiding sexual activity than father-son dyads. Sneed and colleagues' research focused on fourteen specific types of PCSC within various sexed parent-child dyads. These topics included: waiting to engage in sexual activity, abstinence, birth control and condom use, STI warnings and symptoms, dating and relationships, oral sex, and sexual orientation. These fourteen topics were based on Sneed's (2008) earlier work, investigating adolescent's self-report of PCSC topics for both parents.

PCSC between mother-son dyads focus on warnings of preventing pregnancy and avoid topics specific to individual or personal aspects of sexual activity (Kapungu, et al., 2010). Kapungu and researchers also found sons were not likely to discuss topics such as

wet dreams, masturbation, or spontaneous erections with either parent, but specifically mothers. Mother-daughter PCSC similarly focuses on preventing pregnancy, while few mother-daughter dyads address STI prevention and benefits of delaying sexual activity. Father-daughter PCSC primarily focuses on the topic of abstinence and the benefits of delaying intercourse.

Although research indicates the gender and sex of parents and children influence the topics addressed in PCSC, very few of these conversations of any parent-child dyad address sexual orientation. Similarly, the majority of this research focuses on traditional gender roles and heterosexual expectations, thus, leaving out alternative sexual orientations for both parents and children. For gay and lesbian parents, sexual orientation that deviates from the heterosexual normative may be more apparent within their family structure and identity, and thus may be more apparent within PCSC. As parents with the same sexual orientation, gay and lesbian parents may have variations in the nature of sexual communication with their children.

One of the largest hurdles within PCSC is the nervousness from both parents and children to talk about intimate subjects with the other party. Embarrassment can serve as a hindrance to open, honest, and frequent communication about sex and sexual activity between children and parents, peers, siblings, and sexual partners. Although many parents and children face the barrier of embarrassment when addressing sex communication, previous research has investigated what types of topics are addressed within PCSC and which topics are left out of the conversations. For example, Chricton, Ibisomi, and Gyimah (2012) found that Kenyan mothers attempting to discuss topics such

as pregnancy, abstinence, and menstruation with their daughters often ceased

conversations when embarrassment became an overwhelming obstacle.

Although embarrassment when discussing sexual topics can be present across

multiple ethnic groups, age ranges, social classes, and genders, culture as a whole plays a

significant role in how sex is or is not normalized surrounding attitudes of sex and

gender. Schalet (2011) found Dutch parents normalize teenage sex, removing the stigma

and taboo from the act, while American parents often focus on the stigma surrounding

teenage sex, resulting in abstinence messages and stricter behavioral expectations for

their children. Because culture can influence the topics discussed or avoided, frequency

of discussion, and attitudes around particular activities, it is important we examine the

topics discussed within unique cultures and experiences. As gay and lesbian parents have

the same sexual orientation, making sexual orientation and nonheteronormative sexuality

more apparent, research is warranted in understanding the particular topics covered by

same-sex couples in their conversations with their children regarding sex. Thus the

following research question is posed:

RQ2: What are the main topics and discourses inherent within gay and lesbian

parent-child sex communication?

Although previous research has examined themes discussed with heterosexual

parents and their children, this type of research serves as a heteronormative

representation and is not unique to the experiences of same-sex couples and their children

during PCSC. By narrowing the population, it is possible to further understand the topics

discussed solely by same-sex parents and their children during sex communication.

Because the vast majority of research, as well as the majority of sex education

conversations from heterosexual parents, can be regarded as heteronormative, it is imperative to understand how sexual orientation that deviates from heterosexuality affects the conversations regarding sexuality. As sexual orientation within gay and lesbian parents differs from heterosexual parents, sexual orientation within PCSC becomes an important area of research.

Discussion of Sexual Orientation Within PCSC

The need to inform children regarding sexual education that is appropriate for their age, maturity, and in line with moral expectations for behavior is a challenge for most parents (Gagnon, 1975). However, this challenge is amplified for gay and lesbian parents for several reasons. Gagnon and Simon (1973) articulate information regarding sexual reproduction is the center of conversations within PCSC. This includes pregnancy prevention, birth control, and messages of waiting and abstinence for the purpose of preventing unwanted pregnancies. Because gay and lesbian sex is not reproductive sex, gay and lesbian parents are presented with the additional challenge of acknowledging or excluding the topic of sexual orientation and sex without reproduction.

Mitchell (1998) investigated lesbian mothers specifically in their discussion with their children about sex and reproduction. Mitchell found many lesbian mothers included normalizing same-sex partnerships and "sex play" by introducing same-sex characters within children's books and movies, celebrating Pride Week, displaying their wedding album or videos, or bringing children to picnics and events sponsored by gay and lesbian organizations. Introducing and normalizing same-sex partnerships to their children at a young age allowed the participants in Mitchell's study to ease into conversations regarding lesbian partnerships and family identity. As children between the ages of three

and six begin to question how they came to exist (Bernstein, 1994), the mothers in

Mitchell's study all answered with a truthful and age-appropriate answer often starting

with "You started in Mom's tummy" (Mitchell, p. 403). Lesbian mothers with teenage

children noted their children often asked questions about sexual orientation. Every

participant within this study commented unanimously that they reminded their children

that sexual orientation is an individual experience and not a taught or learned trait from

their parents; however, regardless of their child's sexual orientation, they would be

supportive and encouraging as parents. Although only three participants in this study had

children of young adult age at the time of inquiry, all three lesbian mothers commented

that their children had spoken with them more personally and explicitly about sex as

young adults. Finally many lesbian parents commented that as puberty approached they

sought out books or printed materials explaining knowledge of sexual anatomy,

reproduction, and safe sexual practices. However, as many participants could not find

print material relating to bisexuality or homosexuality, many parents felt uncomfortable

providing their children with material that did not represent a worldview that included

sexual practices of people like themselves.

   Although Mitchell's (1998) study provides a critical insight into the specific

challenges of lesbian mothers and reproductive conversations with their children, very

little research exists on the actual conversations surrounding sexual orientation within

PCSC. Sexual orientation serves as a significant and additional conversational challenge

for lesbian and gay parents as well as their children when discussing sexual activity,

sexual reproduction, and sexual health. The impact of parent's sexual orientation on a

child's emotional development has received a significant amount of scholarly attention

(Bos, Goldberg, Van Gelderen, & Gartrell, 2012; Crowl, Ahn, & Baker, 2008; Patterson, 2006; Wainright & Patterson, 2008).

Previous research overwhelmingly reiterates that a parent's sexual orientation bears no negative effects on a child's emotional wellbeing, nor does it affect a child's sexual orientation. This research does, however, reiterate that a parent's sexual orientation does create a unique environment for children of gay and lesbian parents in which children and parents alike must create a sense of family culture and identity that may deviate from the societal norm. Wood (1982) articulates every family, regardless of sexual orientation, creates a sense of relational culture. This family culture includes spoken or implicit rules about what topics may or may not be discussed. Sassnett (2015) argues that the unique culture of family identity created within gay and lesbian headed households allows children with gay and lesbian parents the ability to "navigate and/or negotiate their childhoods in ways that enable them to establish meanings that add value and legitimacy to their lives" (p. 197). Because PCSC serves as one of the most integral parts of establishing, understanding, and educating on sexuality, it simultaneously serves as an important aspect of establishing meaning of sexuality in multiple forms. Children with gay and lesbian parents experience a unique family culture and family identity not present within heteronormative households, and they must "incorporate their parents sexual orientation into their interpretive processes, which results in an additional layer of identity creation in the identity construction process that is not present in heteronormative homes" (Sassnett, 2015 p. 197).

As lesbian and gay headed households face unique challenges in addressing or avoiding sexual orientation within PCSC, creating a distinctive family culture, and

establishing an additional layer of identity, it is critical we understand how sexual orientation is addressed by gay and lesbian parents within PCSC. Although this communicative action serves to be a vital role in PCSC with gay and lesbian parents and their children, there is a lack of representation of these conversations in media and within research. Gay and lesbian parents do not have scripts from which to base these conversations; therefore, many non-heterosexual parents struggle to fill these "empty spaces" with coherent and sound conversations that adequately represent their unique experiences and worldviews (Hicks, 2006). Because these scripts are not an easily identifiable part of society, nor easily identified within previous research, the following research question is asked:

RQ3: How, if at all, do same-sex parents discuss sexual orientation with their children during parent-child sex communication?

As sexual orientation is an additional factor that is added to gay and lesbian parents' PCSC, understanding how sexual orientation does or does not appear within these conversations is a vital part in understanding this unique population and how they make sense of themselves, their families, their sexuality, and their sexual education.

As gay and lesbian parents navigate possible sensitive topics with their children, it is imperative to understand how, if at all, parents prepare individually or as dyads regarding PCSC.

Gay and Lesbian Parent's Preparation for PCSC

Although an abundance of research supports the claim that parents serve as a vital role in their children's sexual education, parents still report anxiety regarding particular topics such as emotions surrounding sex, masturbation, and safe sex practices (Warren,

1995). Parents often avoid these topics or infrequently communicate about them due to a lack of knowledge, perception of their own efficacy, or the fear of revealing personal experiences to their children during the conversation (Jerman & Constantine, 2010; Jordan, Price, & Fitzgerald, 2000). With these constraints and challenges facing all parents, the lack of communication scripts represented for gay and lesbian parents and sex education with their children creates an additional challenge when engaging in PCSC.

Gay and lesbian parents face unique challenges and experiences not specifically addressed within heteronormative households, the preparation of information, knowledge, and gendered communication become additional factors in a gay and lesbian parents' preparation for PCSC. Previous research indicated there are definitive sex differences in the frequency, topics, and reciprocity of PCSC (Coffelt, 2010), making the distinct partnership between same-sex parents offers a unique and understudied population for inquiry. Because previous research has focused on the sex differences that occur within PCSC, as well as the topics that are frequently avoided (e.g. Homosexuality, masturbation, wet dreams), it is critical that research investigates how gay and lesbian parents specifically prepare for these conversations. The division of labor including child caring activities and conversations with children is more equal regarding gay and lesbian households as compared to heterosexual headed families (Chan et al., 1998). Parents with altering sexual orientations beyond heterosexual may be more comfortable, pressured, or inclined to discuss sexuality beyond a heteronormative idea of relationships, sexual activity, or sex education.

Specifically Goldberg, Smith, and Perry-Jenkins (2012) investigated how same-sex parents divide labor of household chores and child-care upon adopting a new child

and found that the division of labor for unpaid household chores was more equal than heterosexual couples division of labor; however, child-care tasks between homosexual couples were greatly affected if one parent shared a biological link to their child. Additionally, previous research indicates that gay and lesbian couples share household and unpaid work more equally than heterosexual couples (e.g. Kurdek, 2007). Because parent-child sex communication is a communicative child-care task that occurs throught a lifetime, future inquiry in how parents divide this labor or prepare for these conversations is warranted. As households headed by lesbian and gay parents experience a unique set of experiences and family culture, it is imperative the following research question is posed:

> RQ4: How, if at all, do same-sex parents converse with each other in preparation
>
> for parent-child sex communication?

By further understanding the nuances and consideration that goes into gay and lesbian PCSC, we may begin to articulate what makes these conversations unique and how this particular population prepares for, delegates, and agrees upon meaning within sex education conversations.

Summary

This chapter proposes the main purpose of this dissertation, to investigate how gay and lesbian parents navigate sex communication conversations with their children, their specific definitions, topics discussed, preparation, and how, if at all, sexual orientation is included within these conversations overall. Specifically, this project serves to shed light on the unique experiences gay and lesbian parents go through during sex communication with their children as previous research has excluded parental sexual

orientation within academic inquiry of PCSC. The research questions posed serve as a foundational point of inquiry when investigating the nuanced and personal details of this population and this subject matter. Because parent-child sex communication serves as a fundamental source of education, information, and articulation of moral expectations for children, we as researchers cannot ignore the seriousness and importance of this conversation. In the same light, because the population of children being raised by gay and lesbian parents continues to grow, we must begin to focus our research in a way that includes these parents, this population, and these experiences. This project serves to fill the gap in current knowledge regarding PCSC to include gay and lesbian parents, in an effort to understand the entire population, not just a part of it. Without this understanding, we lack the ability to fully identify how gay and lesbian parents navigate sexuality, sexual orientation, sexual education that has been traditionally understood as overtly heteronormative. This familial communication may bring better light to how sex communication within multiple forms of families reiterates, challenges, or dismantles heteronormative standards.

With a review of current literature regarding PCSC as well as a grasp on the missing components of this research regarding gay and lesbian PCSC and proposed research questions for inquiry, chapter two serves to offer specific details in relation to the active methodology, analysis, and participant recruitment for this study.

Chapter Two: Methods

The purpose of this study is to provide insight into the unique experiences within sex communication conversations that gay and lesbian parents have with their children. I have previously outlined the existing research regarding parent-child sex communication, as well as a detailed rationale for the current study. Within this chapter, I provide a detailed account of the methodology including a description of recruitment tactics, participants, and the interview protocol. Additionally, I present a description of analyzing practices of the data and themes to accurately describe lived experiences of gay and lesbian PCSC.

Recruitment

Participants needed to meet three criteria to take part in my study. First, parents needed to self identify as gay or lesbian. Second, participants needed to parent a child of any age. Finally, participants needed to have a direct conversation about sex communication with their children. Many gay and lesbian headed families are difficult to access for research, as many of these families are not widely open or vocal about their sexual orientation (Gabb, 2004). For this reason, data collection for this study was primarily focused on accessing these individuals and maintaining anonymity as well as creating a space where these conversations regarding sex communication and sexual orientation could occur safely and openly. As a means of overcoming the difficulty of accessing gay and lesbian headed families for research purposes, network sampling was used. Network sampling is identified as a process of using the primary researchers professional and social networks as a way to identify and recruit participants (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Creswell, 2007). As a primary means of recruiting, I posted a recruitment

statement for this study on my personal Facebook page (Appendix A). All participants initiated contact with me regarding interest in the study rather than me reaching out and contacting participants, as a means of protecting anonymity and privacy. Once interviewing began, many participants willingly shared my contact information with other people in their social networks who fit the call for participation in the study. Those individuals contacted me if they were interested in participating. Thus, participants enacted a snowball sample method of recruiting additional participants for the study (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Creswell, 2007). Biernacki and Waldorf (1981) state that the utilization of snowball sampling, "yields a study sample through referrals made among people who share or know of others who possess some characteristics that are of research interest" (p. 141). Theoretical saturation occurred at fourteen interviews, meaning no new information occurred throughout the interviews, and answers from interview questions reify existing themes found within previous answers and interviews (Creswell, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). However, I continued collecting interviews to further verify findings and with the goal of providing gay and lesbian parents the space and opportunity to express their experiences identifying quality exemplars. Additionally, after each successful interview, participants received a participant recruitment script (Appendix B) to hand out to qualified and willing participants in their social network in order to perpetuate snowball sampling.

Participants

Participants of this study consist of a total of 22 gay and lesbian parents that have discussed any aspects of sex or sexuality with their children. Seventeen participants self-identified as lesbian mothers while five participants identified as gay fathers. Seven

participants reported having a Ph.D. or Ed.D., while four participants reported earning a

Master's Degree. At the time of the interviews, participants ranged in age from 29-61

years old with a mean age of 45. Information on the age, race, education level, self-

proclaimed sexual orientation, and a description of the family structure of each

participant is provided in Table 1. One important note to consider is that Table 1 denotes

the age of the parents and the children at the time of the interview. The interviewees

reflected upon PCSC throughout their children's lifetimes, thus the ages of the parents

and children do not always correspond with the ages at the time of the described

exemplar. Children of participants varied widely in age at the time of interview (ages 4-

29 years old), as sex communication occurs across various age ranges. Nineteen of the

22 total participants identified as White, with two identifying as Black and one

identifying as Hispanic. It is critical to emphasize that participants were allowed to self-

define sex communication. As definitions of family vary among researchers and context,

this project allowed all participants to self-define as parents through a role perspective,

rather than relying solely on legal or biological factors to define parental guardianship.

Parents were allowed to self-identify what sex communication is and looks like as

no formal definition was provided; rather participants were encouraged to explain in

detail what those conversations look like. Parents who have not had a direct conversation

regarding sexual communication with their children yet were not included in this study,

as the primary focus of this study remains the parent-child communication aspect.

Table 1
Description of Participants

Participant (age)	Family Role Identity (Self-Label) Race-Ethnicity Education	Narrative of Participants Family
Beth (56)	Mother "Lesbian" White Master's Degree	Beth and partner, Farrah, have been together 15 years and have one son, David (5). Used a cryobank and Farrah's biological son, soon to be legally adopted by Beth.
Audrey (49)	Mother "Lesbian" White Ph.D.	Audrey and her partner have been together 30 years and have two children, a self-identified transgender female (14), biological child of her partner and adopted by Audrey, and a cisgender female (10) adopted by both parents.
Brenda (39)	Mother "Queer" White Ph.D.	Brenda has one son, Greg (10), who is a biological child from a previous heterosexual marriage. Brenda is currently in a relationship with a woman who lives with her and her son.
Theresa (41)	Mother "Lesbian" White Bachelors Degree	Theresa has two biological daughters (6 & 7.5). Theresa has been in a relationship with her partner for 11 years. Theresa's children "don't have a dad, they have a donor". They are part of a Facebook group that is their half siblings as those children share the same donor, which they refer to as "their far away family".
Sandra (56)	Mother "Lesbian" White 1 year of college	Sandra and partner, Courtney, have been married for 13 years and have one son, Stephen (14), who is a biological son of Courtney. Sandra and Courtney have openly discussed Stephen's father was a one-night-stand who Courtney cannot contact.
Linda (31)	Mother "Lesbian" White Ph.D.	Linda has 3 biological sons (2, 6, & 9) with previous male partners. Linda is in a polyamorous relationship and self identifies as lesbian. Linda has a female fiancé and who is planning on carrying a biological child with Linda's male friend.
Thomas (52)	Father "Gay"	Thomas and Michael have been married 6 years and together 25 years. They have three children

	White High School Diploma	together: a son (18), and two daughters (18 & 22), all of whom were adopted by both partners.
Michael (54)	Father "Gay" White Bachelors Degree	Michael and Thomas have been married 6 years and together 25 years. They have three children together: a son (18), and two daughters (18 & 22), all of whom were adopted by both partners.
Marcus (29)	Father "Gay" Hispanic Ed.D.	Marcus has one stepdaughter, Caroline (5), with his partner. Marcus and his partner have been married for two years and have been together for 10 years. Caroline's mother is active in all of their lives.
Anna (46)	Mother "Lesbian" White Master's Degree	Anna and her partner, Mary, have been together 23 years and have three children together: Matt (8), Ethan (12), and Cory (17). Matt and Ethan are Anna's biological children, and Cory was carried by Mary, and legally adopted by Anna. "Uncle Adam" is all three children's known donor.
Chloe (40)	Mother "Lesbian" White Master's Degree	Chloe and Grace, together thirteen years, have one daughter, Emma (7), using alternative insemination and carried by Chloe.
Dorothy (54)	Mother "Lesbian" White Bachelors Degree	Dorothy and Daphney are divorced partners who co-parent their daughter, Miranda (15) conceived with a sperm donation and carried by Daphney.
Daphney (51)	Mother "Lesbian" White Ph.D.	Daphney and Dorothy are divorced partners who co-parent their daughter, Miranda (15) conceived with a sperm donation and carried by Daphney.
Lexi (35)	Mother "Lesbian" Black Ph.D.	Lexi has two biological children, a gender queer daughter (5) and a son (8). Both of Lexi's children are from a previous relationship.
Gail (53)	Mother "Lesbian" White Associate's Degree	Gail was in a heterosexual marriage for 10 years before coming out as lesbian. Gail has two biological children from her previous marriage: Nichole (25) and Christopher (27). Gail has now been married to Lynn and they have been together

		20 years.
Rachel (51)	Mother "Lesbian" White Ph.D.	Rachel has one biological daughter, Danielle (25), from a previous heterosexual marriage. Rachel and Danielle's father were married for 9 years before Rachel came out as lesbian. Rachel and her partner, Stephanie, have been together for 16 years. Danielle has a 7-month-old child.
Kaitlin (34)	Mother "Lesbian" White Bachelor's Degree	Kaitlin and her partner, Tina, have two daughters. Aimee (16) is Kaitlin's biological daughter from a previous relationship. Ashley (16) became Kaitlin's foster daughter. Both Kaitlin and Tina co-parent together.
Tina (34)	Mother "Lesbian" White Bachelor's Degree	Tina and her partner, Kaitlin, have two daughters. Aimee (16) is Kaitlin's biological daughter from a previous relationship. Kaitlin (16) became Ashley's foster daughter. Both Kaitlin and Tina co-parent together.
Brad (52)	Father "Gay" Black Bachelor's Degree	Brad's female cousin offered to be the surrogate for Brad and his partner, using Brad's partner's sperm. Brad's daughter (9) knows her mother and lives with her fathers.
Andrea (45)	Mother "Lesbian" White Master's Degree	Andrea and Melissa each became pregnant with twins using in vitro fertilization at the same time. They both co-parent two sets of twins all age 4, three sons and one daughter.
Melissa (41)	Mother "Lesbian" White Master's Degree	Melissa and Andrea each became pregnant with twins using in vitro fertilization at the same time. They both co-parent two sets of twins all age 4, three sons and one daughter.
Nathaniel (61)	Father "Gay" White High School Diploma	Nathaniel was previously in a heterosexual marriage for 7 years. Nathaniel and his previous wife have two children, a son (25) and a daughter (29).

Phone and Skype Interviews

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted as a way to best collect individual responses about communication regarding sex as it allowed for similar questions among participants, but allowed for specific follow-up questions to investigate the unique experiences of each individual. As many of the participants were geographically dispersed (ranging from all over the United States), participants were asked for their preference between phone or video Skype interview. Of the 22 total interviews, 20 were conducted over the phone, and two participants opted for the video Skype interview. Interviews ranged in length from 32 minutes to 90 minutes with a mean interview length of 50 minutes. All interviews were recorded as indicated in the Institutional Review Board consent form (Appendix C), and transcribed by the primary researcher totaling 126 pages of single spaced word for word transcriptions. Within those transcriptions all identifying information, such as names and location, were replaced with pseudonyms to maintain anonymity of participants.

Interview Protocol

Although previous research has been conducted on parent-child sex communication, this research has not focused primarily on lesbian and gay parents. Additionally, scholars have largely ignored the role of sexual orientation within the research question aspect of PCSC interview protocols. Therefore, a new protocol was drafted for this particular study. The interview protocol is provided in Appendix D. Although this interview protocol represents a semi-structured interview, allowing for a variety of participant specific follow-up questions, the questions provided on the interview protocol were formatted to provide detail rich information regarding each of the

four posed research questions (see RQ reference on protocol). Each interview started with an overview of the interview intent, a review of the informed consent form, and a collection of demographic related questions prior to engaging in open-ended questions regarding PCSC.

Because sex and sex communication definitions can be unique to individuals and contexts, it warranted that interview questions investigate how gay and lesbian parents define and articulate their definition of sex and sex communication. Knowing the definition unique to these individuals, and perhaps this population, may provide insight into unique definitions of what is and is not lesbian and gay parent child sex communication. Sneed, Somoza, Jones, and Alfaro (2013) have investigated topics parents discuss with their children regarding sex communication. Although the results of this study indicate a foundational understanding of what topics heterosexual parents discuss with their children, it is not known if these topics are discussed or avoided in a similar manner within lesbian and gay PCSC. Therefore, a portion of the interview protocol aims to investigate specifically the topics unique to lesbian and gay parent child sex communication, as particular topics of conversation may be unique to this population.

As Sneed et al.'s (2013) research indicates, heterosexual parent child communication rarely discusses sexual orientation; however, as the distinctive makeup of gay and lesbian headed families provides a specific arena in which to discuss sexual orientation, it is critical to investigate how, if at all, sexual orientation comes up within these conversations of sex communication. Finally, as there is little research regarding how lesbian and gay parents communicate with their children about sex, there are no existing popularized communication scripts in which parents may follow easily.

Therefore, questions investigating how, if at all, parents communicate with each other

regarding the preparation of PCSC aim to provide understanding as to how these

conversations are planned and implemented.

Process for Data Analysis

Throughout the data analysis of this research, I enacted reflective note-taking

during the interview process, allowing me to reflect upon initial responses and mark

influential statements and thoughts. After all interviews were conducted, I engaged in

thematic analysis, making sense of the commonalities and themes emerging from the

lived experiences of the participants. Finally, I enacted a verification process which

included member-checking the population interviewed with proposed themes, as well as a

separate data conference. The first of these data analysis process steps was reflective

note-taking.

Reflective note-taking. During the interview process, I took diligent notes

regarding themes, comments, quotations, and continuity of interview answers. These

individual interview notes were combined and reviewed often and frequently throughout

the interviewing process. Reflecting upon answers of previous participants allowed me

to actively seek themes, consistencies, and contradictions in future interviews. As soon

as possible after each interview I personally transcribed all of the interview recordings

myself, allowing for familiarity of the interviews. After the transcriptions of all

interviews were completed, I reviewed the entire data set, taking notes regarding the

similarities within the data set. Once I created a loose thematic analysis of the themes

within the data, I reread the transcriptions deciding which themes occur throughout each

interpretation of the data set. I conducted careful reading of the transcriptions together and identified overarching as well as line-by-line themes as suggested by Baxter (2011).

Thematic analysis. As there is little previous research in this particular area of communication and this specified population, I utilized grounded theory method of analysis for qualitative data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). By continually reflecting I intended to identify themes that adequately represent the participant's voices and experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes were identified using Owen's method of interpretation (1984) to ensure that each theme meets the criteria of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. Beyond Owen's (1984) method of interpretation, Smith's (1995) five-step parameters for conducting thematic analysis were used. Smith's first step suggests reading the transcripts in their entirety to make the data familiar. Following Smith's second step, as I reread each transcript, I made notes in the margins of the transcripts, commenting or highlighting significant portions of text or meaning. Along the margin of those highlighted passages, I began to note themes that focus towards the purpose of my study and the research questions posed.

Once initial notes and connotations were documented using Smith's proposed thematic analysis, Owen's (1984) proposed concepts of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness were taken into consideration when understanding and documenting emerging themes. Recurrence was identified as any place where the participants discussed the same or very similar ideas throughout the data, these were identified as a recurrent theme. Similarly, repetition was formed when participants used the same words or phrases throughout the data set. Additionally, themes emerged through forcefulness, where a participant notes a large amount of verbal or nonverbal emphasis when

discussing an idea or experience. Notes were taken during transcription that included

paralanguage including: volume, extended pausing, laughter, and verbal emphasis.

After documenting all emerging themes using Owen's guidelines, I continued

with Smith's third step of thematic analysis and listed the themes derived from the

research, and sought out commonalities and similarities among them. Combining

exemplars of data that represented parallel and similar experiences allowed for the

distinction of similarities and the emergence of themes. With the evaluation of

commonalities, I went back into the research data to make sure that the transcriptions

indicated that the participant's experiences were constantly represented within the

emerging themes created. Smith's (1995) fourth step indicated that I create a master list

of each theme that answers to each proposed research question. The fifth, and final step

in Smith's proposed thematic analysis was to add in "identifier of instances" for each

theme created, indicating where in the transcripts that each individual description of that

theme could be found within the data (Smith, 1995, p. 20).

Verification

As Baxter and Babbie (2004) suggest, the purpose of qualitative research is to

"render human action intelligible" (p. 59). In order to ensure that a qualitative analysis is

as true as possible to the lived experiences of the population within the study, it is critical

that qualitative scholars utilize verification measures. Qualitative scholars can enact

verification measures in multiple ways to reduce researcher subjectivity and bias, as well

as ensure the solidity of the study's research design. In order to enact verification

measures and reduce researcher subjectivity within the current study, I utilized two forms

of verification: a) Data conference verification and b) Member-checking. This allowed

me to solidify the strength of my research findings through verification of established

researchers as well as the gay and lesbian parents whose lived experiences I am to make

intelligible.

Data conference verification. Verification of findings included a data

conference as well as member checking in order to ensure the consistency and

authenticity of the data collected. Although members of the population interviewed are

able to comment on the lived experiences and themes involved within the results, often

times they are unable to offer the researchers critiques on implications of findings,

comments regarding existing literature within the field, or theoretical application; thus,

inviting other scholars to reflect on the material together can be an important and

constructive activity termed data conferencing (Braithwaite, Moore, & Abetz, 2014). At

the interactive data conference, I invited several colleagues with familiarity in qualitative

analysis, family communication, gender communication, and parent child sex

communication to offer feedback on my initial themes and results.

Braithwaite, Allen, and Moore (in press) offer several steps for interactive data

conferencing. Following Braithwaite et al.'s steps, the data conference began with a

briefing and discussion of the process of collecting data, allowing the scholars to discuss

the transparency of the data collection process. Second, I presented initial findings related

to the interview themes – providing the invited readers with the proposed research

questions for the study as well as theme titles, descriptions of those themes, and

exemplars of that data, once all identifying information had been removed for them to

read, question, and offer feedback. Finally, I took extensive notes regarding the feedback

of clarity, exemplar fit, and description of themes as to keep note of any alterations and

critiques provided by the data conference and scholar's critiques of the project. Based on the feedback of the data conference, I altered titles of themes, and order of exemplars to better represent the proposed research questions.

Member-checking. As I am not a member of the population examined: a gay or lesbian parent, constant reflection and verification were extremely important throughout this project. Being an outsider to the population, I needed to be aware and conscious of my positionality as I analyzed the data at hand. I worked to create a conversational partnership with my participants so that they felt comfortable sharing their experiences and stories with me, even though I do not personally share their positionality. Once themes were identified, exemplars were selected in order to provide rich and in depth examples of lesbian and gay parents' communication regarding sex and sexual activity with their children. These themes and exemplars were provided to five willing participants via email through a member check process. After interviews, several participants indicated unprompted that they would be interested in the findings of the study, and thus offered to participate in a member check of the initial findings. This process allowed participants to critique, question, and confirm the results of the study (Miles, Huberman, & Saladaña, 2013). To negotiate my own subjectivity of my analysis of the results, I enacted a member-check with willing participants, providing a summary of my findings and a list of all thematic results to ensure that my findings are consistent with their lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). Based on the feedback of the member-check, there were no significant changes to the themes found within the data.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to further understand the unique experiences of gay and lesbian parents during PCSC. Through the semi-structured interview process and subsequent analysis, I was able to identify intriguing themes and findings relevant to the research questions central to my purpose. In the following chapters, I present these findings. Specifically, Chapter Three focuses on the research question centering on the understanding and enactment of same-sex parents' PCSC (RQ1). Chapter Four outlines the specific topics and discourses inherent within PCSC (RQ2). Chapter Five further articulates how sexual orientation is involved within same-sex parents' sex communication with their children (RQ3). Within Chapter Six, I outline the findings on how same-sex parents communicate with their partners in preparation for, as well as throughout, PCSC (RQ4). For each of these chapters, I provide a discussion of the implications of the findings. Finally, I conclude with a Discussion chapter in which I provide implications for all of the discussion chapters in tandem with one another, as well as provide limitations of my study, and suggestions for future research.

Chapter Three: Results and Discussion of Research Question One

In the current chapter, Chapter Three, I provide the findings and discussion of findings from research question one. These findings address how same-sex parents enact and understand parent-child sex communication as well as identifying the main themes inherent within those conversations. Specifically, I identify that parents often understand and enact sex communication through: 1) children led sex communication and 2) parent led sex communication. Children led sex communication can further be identified through: a) children's questions driving the conversations and b) children defining sex communication. Additionally, parent led sex communication was enacted through parents providing: a) inclusive definitions of sex communication and b) exclusive definitions of sex communication. Table 1 contains and explanation and example of each of the themes emerging from Research Question 1. To conclude this chapter, I provide a discussion of the results and implications of the findings of the Research Question 1.

How Gay and Lesbian Parents Understand and Enact Parent-Child Sex Communication

To answer my first research question, "How do gay and lesbian parents understand and enact parent child sex communication?," I asked participants to describe and articulate how sex communication conversations with their children are initiated, handled, and enacted within their families. Specifically, I asked participants to define sex communication, to describe the first, most memorable, and most recent time sex communication happened with their children, and who initiated those conversations. As I analyzed and reflected upon the data, I organized the results into themes aimed to answer these questions. The following sections reflect the findings of how same-sex parents

Table 2

Results: How Gay and Lesbian Parents Understand and Enact Parent-Child Sex Communication

Theme	Explanation	Examples
Child Led Sex Communication		
Children's questions driving conversations	Many parents enacted PCSC by allowing their children to inquire about aspects of sex and sexuality. Allowing children to ask questions provided parents a starting point to initiate PCSC as their child displayed interest.	When they started asking questions like, "Do I have a dad?," … If I can just answer their question with the amount of information they need, then it's perfectly natural. So I've made it a point to take a deep breath and find the right words and just answer their questions. [Theresa, 971-977]
Children defining sex communication	Gay and lesbian parents often allowed their children to provide a definition of what sex and sexual activity meant to them rather than transferring their own personal definition of what sex and sexuality means.	Letting him define for us what he was thinking, because I think kids at that age do have an idea. We wanted to find out from him what that meant from him. [Anna, 2590-2592]
Parent Led Sex Communication		
Inclusive definitions of sex communication	Parents discussed sex and sexuality through purposefully inclusive definitions of what sex and sexuality meant, providing definitions sensitive to sexual orientation and a variety of sexual behaviors.	I just tell my kids as soon as I can that people understand sex differently. I'm not going to tell you what makes it or what doesn't make it. [Linda, 1669-1670]
Exclusive definitions of sex communication	Participants at times enacted PCSC through very strict and definitive meanings of sex. This was often done when discussing the child's sexual experience or safe sex practices.	Are you having actual vaginal intercourse, are you having sex by that definition? [Anna, 2666]

understand and enact sex communication with their children, and provide exemplars to support and explain these findings.

Children Led Sex Communication

While investigating how same-sex parents define, understand, and enact parent child sex communication, many gay and lesbian parents indicated that they allow their children to direct the conversations, thus allowing their kids to lead sex communication, rather than directing the conversation as a parent. As a means of enacting parent child sex communication, the theme of children led sex communication can be further understood by two subthemes: (a) children's questions driving the conversation, and (b) children defining sex communication.

Children's questions driving the conversation. The most common theme regarding how gay and lesbian parents enacted PCSC with their children was allowing their children to ask questions, and use those child-motivated questions to answer or expand upon information related to sex or sexuality. For many parents, responding to a child's question served as an introductory approach to discussing these topics in an age and/or maturity appropriate manner. Beth, a 56-year-old lesbian mother of her five-year-old son, David, discussed how listening to her son's specific questions allowed her to gauge how much information to provide at a given time:

> Sometimes they're asking a question, as an example, my son asked, "Mom, what does gay mean? A little girl at school called me gay." I said, "It means you like boys." And he said, "But I do." I told him, "It means you love them and want to marry them." And then it was really, really quiet and of course at that age they know about marriage, and then he goes "Oh, no I don't. Ok, goodnight." So, he

> wasn't asking about whose gay what's gay sex. He just wanted to know what it
>
> meant. So I knew where to start. I think it's good advice, because now we know
>
> where to start the conversation. [287-296]

For Beth, and others, waiting for their children to ask questions and providing enough

information to answer the questions their children posit created a safe environment for

introducing concepts of sex and sexuality, as well as provide definitions for their children

without introducing topics and depth of conversations past their children's interest levels.

For multiple participants, discussing topics of sex and sexuality with their children could

be nerve-wracking. Theresa discussed the idea of navigating these conversations with a

calm presence in front of her child and answering their questions to difficult or

complicated questions posed by their children. Theresa, a 41-year-old lesbian mother,

has two biological daughters, ages 6 and 7.5. Theresa and her partner have been together

for eleven years and started their family through the use of a known sperm donor.

Although Theresa's family has not met their sperm donor, they are part of an active

Facebook group with families created using the same sperm donor can meet and discuss

with their half-siblings. Their family often refers to their sperm donor as "the donor."

She discusses the challenges and careful navigation she uses when answering questions

regarding her children's donor, basing her answers off of her children's questions:

> I learned a long time ago when they started asking questions like, "Do I have a
>
> dad?," that if I, as a parent, can be cool calm and collected and just give them
>
> enough. If I can just answer their question with the amount of information they
>
> need, then it's perfectly natural. It's like playing chicken with kids. They can
>
> sense if you are uncomfortable, they can sense it and I think it makes them

uncomfortable. So I've made it a point to take a deep breath and find the right

words and just answer their questions. [971-977]

Anxiety or embarrassment when discussing topics of sex and sexual orientation with

family members is not unusual. Some experiences indicated that gay and lesbian parents

used their children's questions as a means of guiding the conversation. A child's lack of

follow up questions may indicate to the parent that they are satisfied with their level of

knowledge and ready to move onto a different conversation. Additionally, a child's

follow up question may display to parents a need for a more in-depth answer,

clarification, or inquiry into the subject. Many parents, like Sandra, used their children's

questions on sex and sexuality as a means of understanding their level of knowledge,

while additionally paying close attention to the phrasing and intent of the question.

Sandra, a 56-year-old lesbian mother of a 14-year-old son, Stephen, articulates how her

son's questions and their phrasing are very important details in understanding how much

information to provide him:

> You'll know when they're ready to talk about it. Each time we've had a hard
>
> conversation with Stephen, it's also when he's pushed a subject or asked a leading
>
> question. You have to hear what they're saying. Does that make sense to you?
>
> You have to hear them. We spend an enormous amount of time with our kid,
>
> most of our time is surrounded about with what Stephen's needs are and it always
>
> has been. [1435-1440].

Overall, gay and lesbian parents indicated that they enacted PCSC as a response to

children's questions. Waiting until children asked questions and then providing enough

detailed information to answer those questions served as a safe and often utilized tactic

for PCSC. Additionally, allowing children to navigate the conversation by asking follow up questions, or to display satisfaction in the level of knowledge they received by not asking supplementary questions created a means for parents to ease children into these conversations in a maturity and age-appropriate way that satisfied their children's quest for information, as well as the parent's need to inform their children. As parents used their children's inquiries as a guideline, many parents often indicated using these opportunities to allow their children to self-define what sex communication is.

Children defining sex communication. The experiences of participants indicated that they enacted PCSC by allowing their children to tell them what they perceived sex communication to be. Allowing children the opportunity to clarify their perceptions of sex communication, as well as display their depiction of definitions allowed parents to navigate their conversations with their children in a way that was in line with how their child viewed sex, sexuality, and sex communication. For example, Anna, a 46-year-old lesbian mother of three sons, describes her and her partner's attempt to allow their eldest, 17-year-old son to help shape the parameters of their sex communication by defining terms himself:

> We decided the first important question we needed to ask was how should we
> gear the information we're giving you? Should we gear it towards somebody who
> is interested in thinking about sexual relationships with women or men or both?
> Letting him define for us what he was thinking, because I think kids at that age do
> have an idea. We wanted to find out from him what that meant from him. I was
> never asked when my parents did whatever ridiculous attempts at talking about
> the subject with me. They assumed that they should give me information about

intercourse between a man and a woman, and they were barking up the wrong

tree. I figured we should find out what we were gearing it towards. [2583-2594]

Anna and her partner allowed their son to start and direct the conversation in a way that

was personal and beneficial for him. At the same time, Anna and her partner provided

their son with an active role in the conversation, by identifying his definitions rather than

imposing societies expetations within what sex communication means. On a similar note,

Theresa explains how her and her partner's conversations with their children consistently

allow their daughters to take an active role in defining and expressing how they viewed

sex acts specifically in relation to morality and the implications of sexual behavior:

> I don't think you can talk about sexuality and sex education with your kids
>
> without getting a perception check on what they think and their opinions. My
>
> girls' bodies don't belong to me. They are theirs, and I need to have a dialogue
>
> with them to make sure I know how they view sex and sexuality and how they
>
> define the morality of sex and what that means. I'm going to do everything I can
>
> to make sure they have all the tools in their kit to make the best choices for
>
> themselves. [1078-1086]

Theresa and others indicated that they allowed their children to express their opinions or

their understanding of terms, behaviors, and relational attributes prior to disclosing their

own opinions or definitions on the matter. These participants put their children in the

forefront of the conversation letting them direct and define the conversation. As PCSC is

an ongoing communication occurance that takes shape across many ages and

enviornments, parents may utilize ways of enacting PCSC. Some gay and lesbian parents

indicated that at times they allowed their children to direct the conversations by asking

questions and defining sex communication. On the other hand, other gay and lesbian parents also indicated a parent led form of PCSC.

Parent Led Sex Communication

Another theme inherent within understanding how gay and lesbian parents enact PCSC was the idea that at times parents actively lead this conversation with their children. Many parents reported introducing the topic or conversation to their children without prompt and while doing so, their responses fell into two types of categories: a) providing their children with a broad and inclusive definition of sex and sex communication, or b) providing an exclusive and specific definition of sex, sexual activity, and sexual communication. The first of the reported tendencies of parent led sex communication was providing and inclusive definition of sex communication.

Inclusive definition of sex communication. Gay and lesbian parents stated that a means of enacting PCSC was introducing definitions to their children. Many parents chose to provide definitions that were purposefully broad, inclusive, and open to interpretation for their children. Linda displayed this inclusive definition and description of the act of sex with her children. Linda, a 31-year-old lesbian mother of three sons, reported using many inclusive definitions purposefully and intentionally with all three of her children:

> I just tell my kids as soon as I can that people understand sex differently. I'm not going to tell you what makes it or what doesn't make it, but I will tell you that it's something that people feel pressure to do, and I need you to never feel the pressure to do it. [1669-1671]

Linda's purposefully broad definition of sex, and exclusion of any listed specific

parameters or behaviors that qualify as sexual activity, allows her and her children the

ability to discuss the conceptual idea of sex without leaving out a variety of behaviors

with liminal definitions. Similarly, Marcus describes how he and his partner intentionally

use inclusive descriptions of aspects of sex and sexuality and forgoes the formal

exclusive 'definitions' or 'labels' on broad concepts created and understood through

communication with his daughter:

> We don't want to teach her very strict categories about what sexual orientation is.
>
> So it might not be that we haven't taught her what sexual orientation is, it's more
>
> that we don't want to label it. We don't want to categorize it as such an early age.
>
> We don't want her to just think inside of these boxes that society has created for
>
> such orientation. My partner and I both had to fight against that, and we know that
>
> sexual orientation just like gender is very fluid. I don't think it is avoidance it's
>
> more so we don't want to teach her bad ideas about sexual orientation. [2330-
>
> 2339]

Like many other participants, Marcus and his partner discuss sexual orientation among

other topics; however, they avoid labeling and placing strict boundaries on what does and

does not represent these topics. Participants often utilize these inclusive definitions;

however, others indicated a more active and exclusive definition when discussing and

enacting PCSC.

Exclusive definition of sex communication. At times during PCSC participants

described providing their children with specific prescriptive definitions and terms in

order to specify and clarify behaviors or expectations. Anna recalls being very

purposeful and explicit with her conversations with her 17-year-old son as a means of understanding his level of engagement in sexual activity with his girlfriend, asking him very specific questions:

> Are you having actual vaginal intercourse, are you having sex by that definition? Because I know as a kid my parents asked me if I was having sex and I refused to answer the question because I knew they weren't real clear on what my definition would be. I pushed them to define it and they defined it in a way that I could deny it and say, 'No, I'm not sexually active.' That mattered a lot to me. So I'm trying to be real careful in defining my terms with him. So I don't just say, 'Are you sexually active?' What the heck does that mean? I try to be real clear about what I'm asking. [2666-2671]

Anna, along with other participants, indicated that gauging or directly asking their children's level of sexual activity was important to them. In order to get a clear answer on their child's sexual activity, some gay and lesbian parents indicated asking directly if they were sexually active. Sandra asked explicitly what level of sexual activity her 14-year-old son was engaging with his girlfriend by outlining her terms of each 'level' of activity:

> I kind of talked about what the three bases were, because sometimes they'll talk about going to second or first base. I did tell him, you don't have to tell me exactly what happened, but you do have to tell me what base you're on. First base is kissing to me, second base is 'feeling each other up', third base is dry humping, is what I call it. They have done nothing more than kiss is what he's been telling me. [1276-1280]

By providing her child with specific terms of what she meant by broad common euphemisms, Sandra and her son were able to create a shared meaning with far less room for ambiguity than if Sandra had not proposed these definitions. This particular example of defining sexual activity and terminology allows her to check in periodically with her child in a less face-threatening manner than asking directly. However, some participants reported using the direct and non-euphemistic approach to discussing sexual activity and behavior with their children. Rachel, a 51-year-old lesbian mother of a 25-year-old daughter recounts checking in with her daughter as she was growing up. Rachel recalls that her and her partner, Stephanie, had been very active in requesting that Danielle practice safe-sex practices. Rachel describes asking her daughter specifically and directly if she was still engaging in safe-sex practices:

> I had made it very clear from the beginning that I expected her to engage in safe
> sex. I always asked her directly, but she would not always answer directly.
> Sometimes she would say, yes. Sometimes she would say yes and I would
> wonder if she was being entirely honest. And then sometimes she would just
> scoff at me. Or she'd say she didn't want to talk about it. She seemed kind of
> private. [3957-3960]

Although Rachel provided a clear definitional meaning that safe sex was a moral expectation that she repeated her hope for her daughter to engage in during sexual behavior, the lack of clear definition of what safe-sex is promoted coexisting ambiguity. She provided a clear delineation that safe-sex was positive, expected, and morally virtuous behavior and a habit that she expected her daughter to commit to whenever

engaging in sexual behavior. However, the ambiguity in what constitutes "safe-sex" is echoed in Anna's description of the term with her son, Ethan:

> With Ethan, I remember the initial conversation we talked about what is safe sex what do people mean by that and what are you being safe from? Are you being safe from being pregnant, from a disease, what diseases are those, what happens when you have those diseases? We tried to be clear when defining our terms.
> [2796-2799]

Anna and Rachel's counter experiences with terms like "safe-sex" represent the complexity and importance of clear definitions for terms that require mutual understanding. The idea of a need for mutual understanding of particular terms and behaviors was echoed throughout the data, while those same participants indicating that other topics within PCSC did not require a mutual definition, but rather a definition specific to each individual. This type of ambiguous and specific communicative dance was repeated throughout the interviews.

Summary and Discussion of Findings

While previous researchers have begun to examine the differences and ambiguity in definitions of sexual behavior (Hill, Bright, & Sanders, 2010; Horowitz & Spicer, 2013; Schick et al., 2015; Trotter & Anderson, 2007; Wentland & Reissing, 2011), little attention has been placed on the familial aspect of parent child definition creating. With such a large spectrum in definitions of sexual behavior as well as the social and moral implications of that behavior, an emphasis on how people understand, define, and talk about sex and sexuality critical. The act of parent-child sex communication is riddled with definitions provided by both children and parents. Those definitions deserve

attention in comprehending exactly how gay and lesbian parents specifically enact and understand sex communication with their children.

Results specific to this research question indicate that parents enact and understand PCSC in both leading and following communicative positions. Gay and lesbian parents within this study reported understanding and enacting PCSC by taking a secondary position and allowing their children to lead the conversation. Children led sex communication resulted around questions driving the conversation as well as children providing definitions of sex communication. Additionally, participants reported that they also took active roles in leading sex communication. Active parent led PCSC was categorized into two themes, providing their children inclusive definitions as well as exclusive definitions.

Children Led Sex Communication

This particular finding suggests that parents were enacting PCSC as a reaction to a child's communication, questions, or definitions. Participants here allowed their children to suggest verbally and nonverbally through communication prompts such as questions, follow up questions, and silences. The research question posited for this portion of the study, questioned how parents enacted and understood PCSC with their children. The concept of children led PCSC insinuates that parents are co-enacting, or perhaps catching up to their children who are pushing for and prompting the conversation along. Multiple participants stated that especially at a younger age, they allowed their children's questions to drive the conversation.

Children's questions driving conversation. Although the gay and lesbian parents who participated within this study raise a wide age range of children, it was

important to note that many of the exemplars and stories prompting this theme were

recollections of when children were younger, specifically ranging in age from 2-8. This

age range is critical for gender constancy, or the understanding that a person's assigned

biological sex is stable and is also accompanied by a plethora of gendered expectations.

Although gender, sex, and sexual orientation are all very different entities of

understanding sex and sex communication, the concept of asking questions related to

these three distinct concepts is consistent with research for this age range. The

understanding of gender constancy may occur as early as three-years of age and the

majority of children will reach gender constancy by the age of six (Miller-Day & Fisher,

2006; Rivers & Barnett, 2011). Thus, this age group may be a prime demographic for

inquiring about gendered and sexed behavioral expectations, understanding family

structure, inquiring about reproduction, and similar concepts all represented within the

data.

By allowing their children to direct the conversations by asking questions, parents

are reactively engaging and enacting PCSC while limiting the notion of providing

detailed information before their child is psychologically or emotionally ready for it.

This provides agency for children seeking information, and could potentially ease the

formality of the "birds and the bees" conversation. Allowing these small questions to

become a part of normal and repeated conversation throughout a lifetime has the potential

to reduce the taboo nature of PCSC as well as still providing detailed biological and

moral information that parents wish to transfer onto their children.

Children defining sex communication. Parents within this study indicated that

they allowed their children's questions to drive the conversation forward, leaning on

follow up questions, or the lack of additional questions to estimate their child's satisfaction of information. Another tactic parents utilized was allowing their children to provide their own definition of particular terms. This enactment of PCSC once again, places the child at the forefront of the communication act, suggesting that they provide their own definitions and describe in detail how they perceived actions, behaviors, relationships, and terms. This research question posits how parents understand and enact PCSC. This particular finding suggests that parents allow children at times to become primary enactors, and certain topics and terms are understood through the child's definition.

An important note of inquiry would be *which* terms parents encourage their children to define. Participants in this study encouraged children to define the parameters of how they wanted information about sex and sexuality directed towards them. This gives children agency in the scope of the conversation; however, the information itself is still directed and enacted from the point of view of the parent with consideration for the child's perspective. For example, Anna and her partner encouraged her son to define who he thought about in a romantic context; providing a leading question so her son could inform his parents of his sexual orientation. Theresa's exemplar, on the other hand, proposed that she needed to check in with her children's opinions on the topic of sex and particularly the morality of sex. Prior to informing her daughter on Rachel's expectations and perceived implications of moral sexual behavior, she asked her daughter. Allowing her daughter to define for herself allowed for Rachel and her partner to create a dialogue with their daughter framed around the daughter's perceptions of what was moral, what was appropriate, and her opinions on sexual activity. Future research would be warranted

in understanding what situations and contexts encourage parents to allow children to self define and what particular terms, if any, parents do not allow for an alternative definition. Although multiple participants encouraged their children to take active roles in leading and defining PCSC, gay and lesbian parents also engaged in parent led communication about sex and sexuality.

Parent Led Sex Communication

Parents often engaged in both child led communication as well as parent led communication about sex and sexuality during various age ranges, situations, and environments. Parent led communication was represented throughout the data as a conversation where parents took an active role in providing definitions and outlining behavioral expectations for their children when they became, or continued sexual activity with a partner. Two major subthemes were represented in parent led communication: parents providing inclusive definitions for their children and parents providing exclusive and specific definitions for their children within these conversations.

Inclusive definitions of sex communication. Of the definitions provided by parents to their children as a means of enacting PCSC, several definitions were left purposefully vague, or inclusive of alternative forms of understanding and conceptualizing these terms. Gay and lesbian parents often described being inclusive of particular terms as a means of not promoting and reinforcing stereotypes or limiting social expectations of particular gendered and sexed behaviors. Inclusivity with parent provided definitions served especially well for descriptions of sexual orientation and describing broad reasons and means of enacting "sex". Linda's exemplar, for example, states that she would not tell her children what behaviors makes sex, but rather encourage

them to understand that the term means many things to many people. By reminding her child that sex can encompass a wide variety of behaviors and meanings, Linda, and other participants deconstruct the notion that sex is only vaginal intercourse, a largely held heteronormative assumption of the definition of sex.

According to Sanders and Reinisch (1999), the first social scientists to directly address personal definitions of "sex", 99.5% of their participants indicated the penile-vaginal intercourse to be sex. However, the same study indicated that 81% of participants reported that anal stimulation or intercourse to be sex, and less than 40% of participants reported believing that oral-genital contact was to be considered sex. Similar studies have replicated and expanded upon Sanders and Reinisch's research (i.e., Horowitz & Spicer, 2013; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007), all indicating that the most agreed upon and universal definition of sex refers to vaginal-penile intercourse, an inherently heterosexual act.

Gay and lesbian parents providing purposefully inclusive definitions of sex and sexuality deconstruct the inherent heteronormativity associated with traditional forms of understanding sex communication. Regardless of their child's sexual orientation, this inclusive definition acts as a way to broaden the conceptualization of what is and is not sexual behavior and who is allowed to participate in sexual behavior. Comprehensive approaches to defining sex also allow for the act of sex to be thought of as more than one act participated in by one particular combination of partners. This specific type of parent led sex communication serves as a means in which parents transfer a more accepting idea of sex and sexuality to their children.

Similarly, sexual orientation was a term that parents within this study were hesitant to label or define, but rather reinforced a broad, fluid conception of sexual orientation, as well as gendered behavior. Marcus' exemplar highlights the stereotypes that he and his partner, and many gay and lesbian parents within this study, faced throughout their lives as a result of their sexual orientation. Inclusive definitions of sexual orientation serve to combat the gendered binary often reinforced through prescribed attributes of sexual orientation and gendered behavior. Although inclusive definitions provided by parents served a purpose and a place within parent led PCSC, participants also strategically utilized exclusive definitions when discussing sex with their children.

Exclusive definitions of sex communication. Describing terms and phrases with distinct and detailed parameters also served a purpose in parent led PCSC. The most predominant use of this particular limited and rigid definitions was represented when parents were seeking information or expressing concern with their child's level of sexual activity with their partner. Gay and lesbian parents used both forms of parent led sex communication providing inclusive definitions for particular situations, and strict, rigid, and narrowly defined definitions predominantly when it came to what levels of sexual activity their children were engaging in. Participants in this study were actively inquiring about the level, or types of sexual behavior their children had experienced. Some participants, such as Sandra, moved beyond just defining terms such as "sex", but created a mutual understanding with her children regarding what common sexual euphemisms were, such as the "bases" of sexual activity. Sandra, and other parents within this study, removed the margin of misunderstanding by directly stating what their terms and

definitions were. The same ambiguity that was previously valued earlier in situations relating to negating stereotypes with inclusive language and definitions is being actively worked against in the context of what behaviors their children are engaging in.

Findings from how parents enact and understand sex communication display a unique communication juxtaposition. Children of gay and lesbian parents hear multiple messages from their parents in relation to enacting and understanding sex communication. At times children are taking the lead in driving the conversation forward, and parents reacting to questions when children display eagerness, maturity, or a need for more information. Other situations recall parents to take the active role in shaping a child's understanding of sex communication by using purposefully inclusive definitions, or purposefully exclusive and rigid terminology. This balance back and forth of when sexuality and sex is fluid and inducts different meanings for different individuals, or the strict guidelines of what sexual behaviors are create a contradiction in enacted sexual communication.

Overarching implications for this particular set of findings deducts that gay and lesbian parents often encourage their children to understand that sex and sexuality are more broad than the traditional heteronormative gendered binary would have them believe. Gay and lesbian parents often work very hard to create explanations of sex communication that can include a variety of people, behaviors, and activities. That inclusivity seems to shift to a narrow scope; however, when discussing the types of behaviors their children are engaging in. Ultimately, enacted PCSC in this context is broad and all encompassing until it relates to their children's sexual debut, protection,

and behavior. There is little room for alternative definitions when parents are inquiring about their child's sexual experience.

Broad and narrow situational definitions can be useful for parents to both incorporate a spectrum of behaviors and orientations into the conversation regarding sex while simultaneously creating a concrete shared understanding with their children. Future inquiries would be warranted in investigating how parents and children perceive this shift in definitions, and which particular additional contexts these explanations change scope from broad to purposefully narrow.

Chapter Four: Results and Discussion of Research Question Two

Within this chapter, I provide the findings and discussion for research question two. This research question inquires as to what are the main topics and discourses inherent within gay and lesbian PCSC. The findings indicate that gay and lesbian PCSC provide several unique topic areas including 1) outlining and defining family structures. Discussing and defining family structures were found within two distinct sub points including: a) parents and children discussing the origin of family and b) family structure. As parents described the origin of family this included describing the biological ties that children have to family members that are either active or inactive in the upbringing of those children. Additionally, discussing family structures included defining for children and gay and lesbian parents alike what their specific family structure looked like. These conversations include titles of family members, diversity of family, and lineage to siblings. As gay and lesbian parents were enacting PCSC, participants also included the additional topic and discourse of describing: 2) sex as a means of reproduction as well as 3) sex beyond reproduction, specifically through the concepts and discourses of a) sex and relationships, as well as b) sex and pleasure. Table 3 contains an explanation and example of each of the themes emerging from Research Question 2. To conclude this chapter I provide a detailed discussion of the findings and the implications of the results of Research Question 2. First, gay and lesbian parents displayed discourses of outlining and defining family structures during PCSC.

Outlining and Defining Family Structures

The most common and reoccurring topic and discourse apparent when asking gay and lesbian parents about their PCSC was the concept of describing, defining, and

Table 3

Results: Topics and Discourses Inherent Within Gay and Lesbian PCSC

Theme	Explanation	Examples
Outlining and Defining Family Structures		
Origin of Family	Participants disclosed the importance of discussing how their specific family came to be. These conversations included methods of conception including adoption, foster parenting, surrogacy, and alternative forms of conception.	A lot of it came up in regards to who was pregnant. Our kids have known who carried whom and I think that was where a lot of conversations started with where babies come from. Saying Uncle Adam is a part of all three of you, but in the younger years talking about you grew in Mary's belly and Matt and Ethan grew in mine. Just in those terms. [Anna, 2740-2743]
Family Structure	In addition to describing how families are created and originated, many families discussed how their specific family functions. These conversations included family member titles, relationships to other people, and describing family diversity.	Even when Stephen was younger, he didn't really know how to introduce me. So I was introduced as his princess. When he was like 5 years old, and that was much easier for him as we went to school. As we got older that didn't work out. I mean I still wanted to be the princess, but that didn't work out (laughs). Then I just started saying, "Are you comfortable with us introducing myself as your mom, are you ok with that?" [Sandra, 1331-1334]
Sex as Reproduction	Gay and lesbian parents described sex as a means of reproduction. Within this conversation many gay and lesbian parents included multiple forms of conception within this conversation.	And again we'll have to include the overarching gay and lesbian issue over what we talk to him about sex, you know? Like where do babies come from? Well you came from a Cryo bank. Uhhh. [Beth, 255-257]

**Sex Beyond
Reproduction**

Sex and Relationships	Participants indicated discussing sex in relation to healthy satisfying relationships in terms of emotional and physical intimacy.	Ultimately the goal is to talk about good healthy relationships in life, and sex is along for the ride. Sex is part of a good healthy relationship. The chief topic is relationships. It's very different if you're open and if you talk about things like that. Not so easy for some kids to actually do. In my case it was pretty easy for my kids. [Nathaniel, 1749-1752]
Sex and Pleasure	When discussing sex beyond reproductive purposes, many parents included topics and discourses surrounding sex for pleasure. These conversations included sex with partners as well as self-pleasure.	Sex is a good thing and you can enjoy it and you need to communicate when you're having it and you might like different things. But also you're going to like some things and not like everything, and that's up to you. Which I think is the message that should be out there. [Audrey, 621-629]

providing details of family structures. Although participants did provide their children with details regarding other family structures, the majority of these conversations within PCSC were rooted in the construct of identifying the child's family of origin as well as describing in detail their particular family structure.

Origin of family. As many gay and lesbian parents create families that do not reflect traditional heteronormative nuclear family depictions, multiple parents indicated that they were encouraged to describe how their specific family came to be. Often, this was done through means of describing a child's family of origin, or detailing how their family was created. Multiple participants used methods of fertilization, adoption, or foster parenting as a means of creating and establishing a family. These experiences often required participants to describe to their children their relationship to other people, some of which were active or inactive in their lives, as well as describe how this led to their current family depiction. Anna describes how she, and her partner, Mary, described to their three children that both partners used the same sperm donor, whom they refer to as "Uncle Adam", and although the siblings have the same biological ties to "Uncle Adam", their ties to their mothers are either biological, or adopted:

A lot of it came up in regards to who was pregnant. Our kids have known who carried whom and I think that was where a lot of conversations started with where babies come from. Saying Uncle Adam is a part of all three of you, but in the younger years talking about you grew in Mary's belly and Matt and Ethan grew in mine. Just in those terms. [2740-2743]

Descriptions of sperm donors and their relationships to family members and the creation of a family are also echoed in Theresa's dialogue. Much like, Anna, Theresa's family

used a sperm donor, and discusses the donor's relationship to their children openly.

Theresa and her partner shy away from using terms like "dad" but openly discuss their

"donor". Here, Theresa describes defining the tern "donor" to her children and it's

relationship to sex and their family ties:

> I always say they don't have a dad. They have a donor. They call him the donor.
>
> That the donor, and they would ask what a donor is, and I would say it takes a boy
>
> part and a girl part to make a baby. And meme and mommy were two girls, we
>
> couldn't make a baby unless we had some help so a nice man let us use his boy
>
> part to make a baby. [994-998]

Theresa and Anna's experiences both depict instances describing sperm donation to their

children, and while this was a common theme throughout the data, other participants

developed families in different ways, and thus, explained their experiences to their

children. For example, Sandra and her partner Courtney have been married for 13 years

and are raising Courtney's biological son, who is 14-years-old. Their son, Stephen, was

conceived from a one night sexual encounter Courtney had. Although they have been

very open with Stephen about how he was conceived, his father is not a part of his life, as

Courtney does not have the information necessary to contact him. Sandra describes in

detail how this particular parent child sex communication conversation outlines Stephen's

family of origin as well as how the act of sex relates to their individual family formation:

> Stephen knows where he came from. He knows that his mom had a one-night
>
> stand. He knows that his father wasn't a bad person but we just can't find him.
>
> We are really open about the fact that you can get pregnant no matter what you
>
> do. Courtney went through and explained she had a one-night stand, specifically

at a bar here in town. She knew she was pregnant. She thought maybe she could

find him. She couldn't, because she had no idea. She tells him all this. We are

very honest with him. So he knows it was a choice she made, and I tell him that

too, we tell him people make choices to keep babies. A lot of people make

choices to keep them. She made a choice to have you and make a difference and

that's a big deal. [1351-1360]

All previous examples of describing family of origin to children represent parents

describing individuals who may be referenced actively through rhetoric, but not

physically present within a child's life. Communicating about these figures serves as a

means to acknowledge their influence on their family's relationship and allow children to

make sense of their creation story. Discussion of these individuals who are not

physically present within a child's life were common topics and starting points in

engaging children in their family story; however, Brad's particular family of origin story

reflects explaining to his daughter about her mother who was active in her life in another

capacity. Brad's female cousin volunteered to be the surrogate carrier of Brad and his

partner's child through the use of artificial insemination, using Brad's partner's sperm.

His nine-year-old daughter has grown up interacting regularly with her mother.

It was a while before my daughter asked about my cousin, who doesn't live near

by but has always been a part of her life. It took her daughter a while to figure out

that she was her mother. It wasn't something that we were hiding. It was pretty

clear. We referred to my cousin's son as our daughter's brother. She wasn't that

old, she was probably 4-5 when she just asked, "Is she my mother?" and we said,

"Yes." and she was like "Oh, ok." Then she went on about her business and all

was good. There was never any big issue around family structure. She knew that some of her friends had mom and dads. She knew friends that had two dads or two moms. She's always known a variety of family makeups. [4340-4347]

Brad's experience represents gay and lesbian parents who have active members, to varying degrees, of a child's family of origin story within their lives. The balance between parent and contributor to a family's story of origin is an interesting component of this form of PCSC.

Family structure. In addition to describing how families were created, several participants addressed topics and discourses explaining how their individual family structure functions. These conversations ranged from describing family diversity, explaining distinctive family structures to others, and navigating titles of family members. For example, Beth explains a conversation she had with her five-year-old son in response to him inaccurately claiming he found his father at school.

He would come home from preschool and he said he knows where his dad is. He was saying his dad was at school. Well it was one of the student teachers he was identifying with, and he was claiming that it was his dad. Then we had to talk to him about it and say, "No, he's not your father." We reinforced that some families have to moms, some have two dads, some have one mom, and some might have a grandma. We kept telling him your family has two moms. So we had to give the different family ties. [184-186]

For Beth and her partner, using this opportunity to clarify their family ties, as well as reinforce their family structure was very important. Theresa reified this sentiment of outlining her specific family structure, two moms and two children, as well as

simultaneously acknowledging that other families may be different. Theresa explains that her daughter inquired about her father:

> When she got to preschool, I think it was just a normal part of preschool conversation and lesson plans to draw a picture of your family. I'm sure she was drawing her two-mom family and somebody probably said, "Who is that?" She would start to say, "Do I have a dad?" And I would say, "Well, no." We've always relayed the message that all families are different. Most families have a mom and a dad, but there are a lot of different kinds of families, two moms, two dads, one mom or one dad, or some kids don't have a mom and dad they have a grandparent. [979-985]

Reiteration that other family structures may differ was a reoccurring theme in topics within gay and lesbian PCSC. Participants, such as Beth and Theresa, explained that other family compositions might look different than theirs, while simultaneously describing how their family structure works and functions. These stories were told so frequently, that several participants described their children explaining their unique family composites to individuals outside their family. For instance, Melissa and her partner, Andrea, reiterated to their unique story to their children many times. Melissa and Andrea both used in vitro fertilization at the same time, as a way to double their chances of acceptance rates of the procedure. Both Melissa and Andrea became pregnant within weeks of each other, and both women carried twins to term. Melissa, a 41-year-old lesbian mother explains that their two sets of four-year-old twins have been informed of their relationship to each mother, and to each other so well, that the children often inform other individuals of their family structure:

We were at Disney World and we were buying pictures of our turn down Splash

Mountain. We went to buy the picture because we posed for it. The cashier had

said, "Oh this must be your brother." William started off on the story of "Oh we

are twins, but this isn't my twin, my twin is my brother." Then he looked at the

woman and said you know what it's a long story. [4583-4588]

Although Melissa and Andrea's children were at ease discussing their family structures to

other people, some participants and their children had a more intricate dialogue regarding

the family structure and which titles each family member would hold. As an example,

Sandra, who has been a part of her 14-year-old son's life for 13 total years, navigated

with her son what title she would hold. She describes her son's hesitancy in her title

intensified when he attended school and had to describe Sandra's relationship to his

family structure to other people. Sandra explains:

Even when Stephen was younger, he didn't really know how to introduce me. So

I was introduced as his princess. When he was like 5 years old, and that was much

easier for him as we went to school. As we got older that didn't work out. I mean

I still wanted to be the princess, but that didn't work out (laughs). Then I just

started saying, "Are you comfortable with us introducing myself as your mom, are

you ok with that?" But Stephen's 15 now, so 10 years ago, he was five. And

things have gotten a little bit better for him. [1331-1336]

Sandra and her son, along with other participants and their families, engaged in

distinctive conversations about what titles are appropriate and descriptive of their family

structures. In addition to outlining and defining families of origin and family structures,

gay and lesbian parents reported discourses and topics of describing to their children sex in terms of reproduction.

Sex as Reproduction

Another common topic and discourse inherent within gay and lesbian PCSC is the concept of discussing sex in relation to reproduction. These discussions created a unique experience for same-sex parents to describe traditional and alternative forms of conception. Beth, a 56-year-old lesbian mother, articulated the common experience many participants faced in explaining conception as a same-sex parent:

> And again we'll have to include the overarching gay and lesbian issue over what
>
> we talk to him about sex, you know? Like where do babies come from? Well
>
> you came from a Cryo bank. Uhhh. [255-257]

Alternative forms of conception, such as artificial insemination, the use of surrogates, sperm and egg donations were common for participants. These topics and discourses were discussed with their children, as were traditional forms of conception. Parents, such as Brenda, a 39-year-old lesbian mother, used the knowledge base of traditional conception in strictly biological terms, to expand upon the discussion with her son. Brenda's 10-year-old biological son was conceived from a pervious heterosexual marriage. Brenda indicated that traditional forms of conception were being discussed in school at the time. Later in life Brenda came out to her son as queer. It was Brenda's lesbian friends that caused her son, Greg, to reflect upon the traditional form of conception he had been learning about, and ask additional questions. Brenda explains:

> We have some friends who are lesbian parents. That's about when he was
>
> learning about traditional heterosexual reproduction. So pretty early it was like

"Well how did they have babies?" So he knew about the sperm and the egg, and

at the time it was pretty easy to say, there are other ways to get sperm in there. So

if you start early it's not too complicated that there are other ways that it might

happen. [887-891]

Brenda's combination of traditional forms of conception and explaining alternative forms

of reproduction are reiterate in Dorothy's experiences. Dorothy, a 54-year-old lesbian

mother recalled her conversation with 15-year-old daughter, Miranda, pertaining to sex

and reproduction. Dorothy revamped the traditional male and female reproduction and

reduced conception to the necessity of male "factor". This rhetorical act reinforced to her

daughter that male and female parts are necessary for conception, but that many

individuals are capable of reproducing with access to those resources:

Yeah, she asks where babies come from. That was a question before the sex

education. I went through and said, "It's when a man and a woman are together,

or in your case, there was not an actual man, but the part of the man that we call

the male factor." We actually walked through what happened and how she came

about. [3329-3332]

Expanding upon traditional biological aspects of reproduction to include forms of

reproduction for same-sex or single parents served as a useful discourse for many gay and

lesbian parents. Nathaniel, a 61-year-old gay father, however, discussed the topic of sex

and reproduction in a more heterosexual manner. Nathaniel has two children, 25 and 29-

years-old, from a previous heterosexual marriage of seven years. At the time of the

conversation with his son, Nathaniel recalls that he was still married, and he was not out

as homosexual to his son. During a long car ride, Nathaniel recalls his son asking various

questions in relation to sex and reproduction. Allowing his son's questions to lead the conversation, he describes how he discussed sex and reproduction to his son:

> My philosophy is if you ask the question, you get the accurate answer. So we used the correct terminology, the right stories, so ok. We're talking about babies and how they were made. We did get full on: the penis goes in the vagina and so on. It was only the heterosexual way. My son at the time was eight, so the in vitro methods were not on the radar or part of the discussion. [4772-4778]

Nathaniel's explanation of sex and reproduction to his son were centered in heterosexual traditional forms of conception. Other parents, however, such as Chloe, heavily centered their descriptions of conception in alternative methods, and skipped the traditional format altogether. Chloe, a 40-year-old lesbian mother of seven-year-old daughter, Emma, explains that she so was so concerned in integrating and normalizing Emma's conception story that she nearly forgot to explain alternative to her, or traditional, heterosexual forms of conception:

> The first time I told her how heterosexual people usually have babies she thought I was nuts. And I realized, Oh I've been telling her all this stuff about alternative insemination and she should know that her buddy, Tyler, who has a mom and a dad and he started a different way and a more usual way. It'd be like, I don't know, raising a kid on soy yogurt and then forgetting to tell them that cow's milk and dairy products exist, and they're like, "What?!" [3053-3058]

Degrees of integration of traditional and alternative forms of conception varied from participant to participant. The conversation surrounding sex and reproduction transpired differently for many participants, while remaining a common topic and discourse among

the gay and lesbian parents interviewed. Communication surrounding sex and

reproduction also expanded into another common topic and discourse for gay and lesbian

parents enacting PCSC, to describing the act of sex beyond reproduction.

Sex Beyond Reproduction

Describing the act of sex in terms of a purpose of reproducing a child is an

obvious starting point in describing where children come from and one of the ways that

families are formed. As children grew, and questions became more complex, gay and

lesbian parents often had to adapt their conversations to describe sex in terms beyond

reproduction. These discourses took multiple forms including describing sex as a part of

relationships as well as sex and pleasure. First, parents commonly reiterated how sex is

not just for purposes of conception, but rather a common feature in relationships.

Sex and relationships. Strictly biological terms and descriptions of sex

regarding reproductive purposes leave out the larger view of sex and its affects in

relationships. Thus, many parents articulated that sex has a place beyond reproduction.

This aspect of expanding upon sex and its place within relationships also created an

avenue for parents to relate sex to non-heterosexual relationships, combating

heteronormativity within these conversations. This was one aspect of discourses with her

child that Brenda was very aware of. Brenda, a 39-year-old self identified queer mother

of 10-year-old Greg, recalls being very aware of avoiding solely heteronormative

approaches of communicating about sex:

I made sure not to be heteronormative. I guess that's one thing at the beginning I

was very concerned with making sure he knew how babies are made, and that

becomes a limited view of it. Not letting it just the idea that sexuality is only

about making babies. That's not the case for a while. Most people aren't trying

to make babies the first time. So talking about relationships and things like that.

[874-878]

In addition to avoiding heteronormative approaches, and integrating sex as a part of

romantic relationships regardless of sexual orientation, participants also discussed

normalizing sex as healthy and normal aspects of relationships. Nathaniel recalls

discussing with both of his children that sex has a place within healthy romantic

partnerships:

Ultimately the goal is to talk about good healthy relationships in life, and sex is

along for the ride. Sex is part of a good healthy relationship. The chief topic is

relationships. It's very different if you're open and if you talk about things like

that. Not so easy for some kids to actually do. In my case it was pretty easy for

my kids. [1749-1752]

Nathaniel's communication aimed to normalize sex as a healthy and natural aspect of

multiple types of relationships was well received by his children. Although messages of

normalizing sex were a common theme throughout parents describing sex and

relationships, there were also many parents who indicated describing the potential

negative implications of sex. This often came along with messages of warning children

about potential negative implications, as well as wishing children would wait until they

were emotionally mature and committed to partners. Beth describes a balance of

describing sex positivity with the potential dark implications of sex and sexual activity.

Beth described to her son the wide variety of ways sex can influence relationships:

It's not only the biological sex, because obviously we have to talk about that, but

going broader. Not just the biological part, but discussing gender and what

people feel internally, externally. Then also discussing the consequences of

actually having sexual relations and the other side. So, whether it's diseases or

babies or healthy relationships, domestic violence and sexual harassment and

misconduct, discussing the whole spectrum of sex, sexual implications and

relationships. The good, the bad, and the ugly. [57-67]

Beth depicts the variety of positive and negative implications of sexual activity and

sexual behavior. The theme of warning children about the potential emotional and

physical safety hazards and dangers of sexual activity was common for parents. At the

same time, many parents held a very sex positive attitude. Brenda extends her sentiments

by creating a message of fun and love in relation to sex within relationships:

I think you have to address that sexuality is about pleasure and fun and

relationships and expressions of love, because otherwise if you are talking about

reproduction that becomes heterosexual. Also talking about other ways families

are made. So talking about adoptions and artificial insemination as well. [880-

885]

Similar to Beth's sex positive explanation of sex and relationships, other participants

reported explaining the interrelationship between sex and pleasure both pleasure of self

and pelasure of partners.

Sex and pleasure. The nature of same-sex relationships often caused

participant's children to question if and when their same-sex parents engaged in sexual

activity. Many participants indicated these types of questions, predominantly from young

children and often after children had learned their family of origin and conception story.

Chloe reiterated the themes represented by many parents, stating that these conversations

could be uncomfortable to communicate to their children, but a necessary component of

normalizing sex and discussing it in a realistic and nonheteronormative light. Chloe, who

was open with her daughter about the use of artificial insemination in her conception

story, recalled the day that her daughter asked about her mothers and their sexual activity.

As her daughter realized the nature of sex and reproduction, Chloe explained the

relationship between sex and pleasure:

> Sex for pleasure seems a little bit harder to discuss. I think she recently put it
>
> together. Like wait a minute, you and Mommy do stuff like that, and I'm like,
>
> "Well we both work really long hours, and we're tired and you hardly ever have a
>
> babysitter, so not a lot, but Yeah! This is what grown ups do." To put that
>
> message of bodies feel good and this is something that grown ups do. But it feels
>
> a little more awkward to talk about that, but I'm trying to be better about that.
>
> [3012-3017]

Chloe's direct conversation with her daughter regarding sex and pleasure reifies that

communication about this topic can be difficult or embarrassing, but important. A large

majority of participants expressing topics of pleasure and sex within PCSC articulated

specifically attempting to make these conversations with their children normal, pleasant,

and common aspects of communication. For example Audrey, a 49-year-old, lesbian

mother, recalls making a conscious effort to normalize the conversations of sex and

pleasure. Audrey's children include a 14-year-old self-identified transgender daughter, as

well as a cisgender 10-year-old female. Audrey states that conversations of sex and

sexuality are common in her home, and she and her partner try very hard to normalize all aspects of sex including pleasure while emphasizing the importance of open communication:

> Sex is a good thing and you can enjoy it and you need to communicate when you're having it and you might like different things. But also you're going to like some things and not like everything, and that's up to you. Which I think is the message that should be out there. [621-629]

Audrey's conversation reflects many parents' messages to their children that pleasure is different for everyone, but open communication with partners are important. During these conversations, many parents also offered information regarding self-pleasure or masturbation. Anna recalls having this conversation specifically with her oldest son. She and her partner offered information regarding safe and healthy options for self-pleasure, and Anna's son was curious if his lesbian mothers were familiar with aspects of the male anatomy:

> I remember he asked us if we knew what some words were. I remember he asked us if we knew what a 'boner' was. I'm not sure if he asked us because we're lesbians or if he thought it was a teenage word. We laughed and we said, "Yup, we're familiar with the term." [2637-2639]

Many parents reiterated providing information to their children regarding sexual self-satisfaction as an option to release desires in a safe and healthy way. These conversations happened over a variety of age groups, most notably during the onset of puberty as well as when children started dating. For example, Thomas, a 52-year-old gay father

reiterated to his three children that masturbation was a normal and acceptable part of sexual activity:

> We talked about masturbation at a very young age. They know they could take their sexual frustrations out that way instead of having a partner. That it's normal and it's ok. It's hard for them to hear their parents talk about self-satisfaction. When our oldest daughter started dating we brought it up again. We told her that it might come a time where the boy wants to have sex with her and it's easier, if she needed to release that tension after, to practice masturbation instead. [2022-2010]

Parent child sex communication regarding pleasure often served as a way to reinforce that pleasures may be different and unique to each individual. Many parents provided a sex positive attitude regarding self-pleasure, making sure to avoid shaming and negative communication surrounding masturbation and self-exploration. Lexi, a 35-year-old lesbian mother of two children recalls having several conversations with her children explaining that self exploration was normal and acceptable, avoiding shaming them and never shaming or discouraging communication about sexual pleasure:

> They understand how their body works. They understand what types of pleasures they have and enjoy and enjoy giving and they are comfortable talking about that. They don't judge themselves. They understand that everybody's sexuality is different and they are no different. That's ok. They engage in sexual activity as often as they deem appropriate and necessary for themselves without judging themselves. So they have a very positive attitude about sex. [3590-3595]

Topics and discourse surrounding sex for reproductive purposes as well as for pleasure were common within gay and lesbian PCSC. These conversations indicate a variety of important implications for how PCSC is understood as well as the messages children are hearing in regards to sex communication. In order to fully comprehend these messages, I offer a summary and discussion of the findings.

Summary and Discussion of Chapter Four

Within this chapter, I provided research findings regarding what topics and discourses gay and lesbian parents discuss with their children during PCSC. Previous studies have investigated what topics are present during parent child sex communication (e.g., Kiltsch, 1992; Eisenberg et al., 2006; Raffaelli, Bogenschneider, & Flood, 1998; Sneed et al. 2013; Wilson & Koo, 2010). Although previous researchers have investigated the various topics and discourses surrounding PCSC, none of the research to date that I could located primarily focused its study on the population of gay and lesbian parents discussing sex and sex communication with their children. Through this study, I begin to shed light on the aspects of topics and discourses that gay and lesbian parents specifically communicate to their children through PCSC. To follow, I summarize each category of findings offer implications and discussion of results from this research question.

Outlining and Defining Family Structures

One of the most predominant topics and discourses present within gay and lesbian parent PCSC was the repetition and ownership of the narrative of how participants' specific family structure worked and how they defined them. Some participants did describe alternative forms of family in an attempt to normalize variety of structures, but

the most apparent form of outlining family structures within PCSC was providing

children with an answer to questions about their family structure, and ownership of a

story that they could hold onto and retell as they wish to other individuals outside the

family structure. Because participants started families through a variety of different

means, including: previous heterosexual marriages, foster parenting, adoption, artificial

insemination, surrogacy, etc., these stories take a variety of forms. However, the

commonalities within these stories indicate that gay and lesbian parents reiterate origin of

family, the biological ties that children have to family members that are either active and

inactive in the upbringing of those children, as well as the description of their present

family structures.

> **Origin of family and family structure.** Narratives, or descriptive stories

regarding the origin of a child, are present in a variety of families. Suter, Baxter, Seurer,

and Thomas (2014) describe the incredibly important presence of constructed narratives

of parents and children in their definition and meaning making of 'family' for foster

adoptive parents. When discussing the links of children to other individuals, either

present or not present in the upbringing of those children, many gay and lesbian parents

referred to the origin of their family. This was most prominent through adopted, foster,

and surrogate means of creating and establishing a family. It is important to note that the

origin of family narratives were not represented at all in participants within this study

who indicated that they conceived their children through a previous heterosexual

marriage. This may indicate that traditional forms of heterosexual marriages and children

represent a family structure that needs little verbal discussion and communicative

meaning making. However, previous research has highlighted the importance of

adoption entrance narratives for parents as well as children. Kranstuber and Kellas (2011) found that adoptee's entrance narrative has a substantial impact on adoptee's self-concept. Similarly, research on stepfamily origin indicates that narratives from stepchildren's stepfamily origin stories were found to be framed more positively when those children were included in the process of negotiation or forming the stepfamily (Kellas et al.,2014).

The findings of this study align with previous research on the importance of co-created narratives of nontraditional family structures. For example, Harrigan, Dieter, Leinwohl, and Marrin (2015) found that narratives and constituative views of communication allow sperm donor conceived offspring to make sense of their experiences as well as co-construct their identities with the help of narratives of family members. These findings suggest that many gay and lesbian parents who use nontraditional forms of conception may rely heavily on narratives of family of origin stories to connect their children to their biological ties, as well as allow them to construct an identity within their current family structure.

The inclusion of topics and discourses surrounding family of origin as well as family structures within PCSC indicate that gay and lesbian parents are discussing alternative forms of family conception along with the discussion of sex. By including these conversations regarding how families are formed and the definition of families, within this context, gay and lesbian parents broaden the concept of sex and sex communication beyond the act of sex for reproduction. Additionally, it is important to note that participants indicated that the majority of these conversations were inclusive of sex communication throughout the lifetime of their children, but purposefully included as

children were 10 years or younger. Participants noted that these stories served to explain

family and conception in a means that represented their families, and introduced sex

communication without providing too much in depth discussion of the act of sex before

participants' children were emotionally ready or mature enough to inquire about those

topics. These co-created narratives and discourses allowed gay and lesbian parents to

provide their families, and specifically their children, a means in which to identify,

understand, and enact within their created definition of family.

Sex as Reproduction

Although the majority of participants indicated discussing alternative forms of

conception and family structure narratives while children were younger, many

participants still discussed view of sex an act and as a means of reproduction.

Participants often navigated this conversation by comparing traditional forms of

reproduction, how men and women engage in intercourse with the intention of

reproducing a child, with alternative forms of reproduction. For example, Dorothy's

description to her daughter of where children come from started with a traditional form of

sex education as reproduction; however, Dorothy took the opportunity to expand upon

the traditional conception description and provide her daughter with a description of how

she was conceived. Similarly, Brenda's son was learning about traditional forms of

heterosexual conception, and although Brenda's son was conceived traditionally through

a previous heterosexual marriage, she also took the opportunity to describe alternative

forms of reproduction.

Additionally, Chloe restated alternative forms of conception narratives,

predominantly alternative insemination, so frequently as a means of normalizing her

daughter's conception story, that her daughter did not hear the traditional means of male and female intercourse as a means of conceiving a child until she was older. As a contrast, Nathaniel, who was still in a heterosexual marriage and not out as homosexual to his family at the time, only described a heteronormative form of conception. This suggests that parents may utilize an ethnocentric description of conception during PCSC. Children of gay and lesbian parents often receive a description of a wide variety of families; however, sex as reproduction may be based on the parent's use of alternative or traditional forms of conception when describing it to their children. Finally, it's critical to note that Nathaniel's conversation with his son took place prior to the normalization and public discussion of in vitro fertilization, suggesting that the time in which these conversations may heavily influence the variety of knowledge about reproduction that children received.

As many gay and lesbian parents navigated discussing sex as a means of reproduction, the counter narrative of traditional and nontraditional forms of reproduction serve to highlight the heteronormative nature of some PCSC conversations. Future inquiries into the use of nontraditional forms of conception and the discussion of providing counter narratives to traditional heteronormative reproduction would be warranted in order to further our understanding of gay and lesbian PCSC as well as heterosexual parent PCSC. Although many parents provided discourses of sex and sex communication to their children as discussing sex through means of reproduction, many parents expanded beyond this limited perception of sex communication and included conversations beyond simply reproductive purposes.

Sex Beyond Reproduction

The biological concept of sex and reproductive purposes is often the stereotyped and cultural perception of the parent-child 'birds and bees' conversation. However, this study indicates that many gay and lesbian parents specifically are reaching far beyond the traditional connotations of sex and reproduction and discussing the aspects of sex within healthy, consensual, adult relationships as well as sex for pleasure of self and pleasure of partner.

Sex and relationships and sex and pleasure. Parent child communication about sex and sexuality can often result in parents and children reporting embarrassment or discomfort (Jerman & Constantine, 2010). Discussing with children the relationship of sex and pleasure of self and pleasure of others can be a discourse that leads to the uncomfortable nature of PCSC. However, many gay and lesbian parent participants reported that this was a critical aspect of discussing sex communication with their children, as it broadened the conception of sex as only heteronormative reproduction, as well as introduced sex as an aspect of relationships and pleasure for many relationships, regardless of sexual orientation.

Although parents reported actively discussing this with their children, the majority of these gay and lesbian parents also noted within the interviews that this particular discourse could be uncomfortable in nature. Many participants chose to great this challenge with the opportunity to appear calm and collected in front of their children in an effort to normalize the conversation and make sex communication with their child a comfortable and approachable subject, in spite of the parents' internal discomfort. Discourses surrounding sex and relationships commonly originated from conversations

regarding various forms of relationships, heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, pansexual, etc. The inclusion of conversations of how partners, regardless of sexual orientation, communicated wants, needs, and safety practices during sex was a common theme throughout these conversations. Some participants noted that discussing sex in terms of relationships (of various forms) and sex for pleasure heightened parental discomfort levels, as it was often linked to personal experiences either for parents or children.

As children reached puberty, expressed interest in partners, or began dating, many parents viewed this as the time to discuss sex and its link to relationships and pleasure. Thus, these conversations were usually, but not always, enacted with children who were expressing interest in romantic issues. This link to the child's interest often meant that these conversations were not always enacted in abstract theoretical or hypothetical connections, but rather were a result of children beginning or continuing romantic interests. Similarly, some of these conversations were rooted in children, of various ages, questioning the relationship of sex and their same-sex parents. For example Chloe's response to her daughter, who understood the biological aspect of heterosexual conception, questioning of her mothers participated in sexual activity, forced Chloe and her partner to address that sex goes beyond reproduction and has a place in relationships of various formats and is linked to pleasure and intimacy.

Descriptions of sex beyond reproduction were often introduced or embraced by parents as an opportunity to combat heteronormative understandings of sex. Gay and lesbian parents still described reproduction and conception, but many children of gay and lesbian couples questioned; if traditional forms of reproduction are reserved for heterosexual partners, how, if at all, do homosexual partners engage in it, and for what

purposes? This places gay and lesbian parents in a position to be able to describe sexual

activity as a normal attribute that individuals engage in with themselves and with others.

Often participants used these conversations to reduce stigma and shaming surrounding

sexual behavior, encourage communication about safe and healthy forms of sexual

expression, and create a sex positive environment for their families. Although this

positionality can create a sex positive environment, many gay and lesbian parents

addressed these issues but reiterated themes inherent in heterosexual PCSC, such as

waiting, warning narratives, and moral expectations of sexual behavior (Sneed et al.,

2013). This unique positionality of discussing sex beyond the purposes of reproduction,

including relationships, intimacy, personal and partner pleasure creates a distinctive

environment for gay and lesbian PCSC. Future research inquiring how parents

specifically navigate the inclusion of discussing with their children sex beyond

reproduction, while conveying messages of safety and moral implications of sexual

behavior would expand our current knowledge of gay and lesbian specific PCSC.

Chapter Five: Results and Discussion of Research Question Three

Within this chapter, I investigate how, if at all, sexual orientation is discussed with gay and lesbian parents and their children during PCSC. As sexual orientation of gay and lesbian parents differs from the social assumption of presumed heteronormativity, understanding how sexual preferences and orientation interact within parent child sex communication and conversations is critical. Findings of this study indicate that many the topic of sexual orientation is integrated through: 1) children's "coming out narratives", 2) "normalizing" sexual orientation and addressing the 3) heteronormative nature of these conversations. Parents enacted addressing the heteronormative nature of conversations by a) accepting heteronormativity and b) resisting heteronormativity by using gender-neutral terms. Table 4 contains an explanation and example of each of the themes emerging from Research Question 3. To conclude this chapter, I offer a detailed discussion of the results and implications from the findings of Research Question 3. First, many children of gay and lesbian parents initiated the topic of sexual orientation by producing their own "coming out narrative".

Child's "Coming Out Narrative"

In contrast to the concept of gay and lesbian children's "coming out narratives" to their parents (e.g. D'amico, Julien, Tremblay, & Chartrand, 2015; Perrin-Wallqvist & Lindblom, 2015) and gay and lesbian parent's "coming out narratives" to their children (e.g., Breshears, & Lebbe-De Beer, 2013; Daly, MacNeela, & Sarma, 2015), results from this study indicated that many children of gay and lesbian parents enacted "coming out" as a specified orientation to their gay and lesbian parents. Kaitlin, a 34-year-old lesbian

Table 4

Results: How Sexual Orientation is Discussed Within Gay and Lesbian PCSC

Theme	Explanation	Examples
Child's "Coming Out Narrative"	Children of gay and lesbian parents often "came out" by disclosing their predominantly heterosexual sexual orientation.	She asked me, "Are you going to be upset if I'm straight?" (*Laughs*) I said, "Why would I be upset if you are straight?" She said, "…Some of my friends who are gay, their parents are upset because they're gay, and I have lesbian parents and I'm just wondering if you're going to be upset that I'm straight." [Rachel, 4000-4003]
"Normalizing" Sexual Orientation	Parents in this study sought to make sexual orientation a normal and accessible aspect of conversations by discussing sexual orientation frequently and in tandem with other identifying and unique factors of individuals.	It was never a big deal. It was just something that we talked about when we talked about people being different. Some people are black, white, chubby, skinny. Some people are gay. Some people are straight. So I always approached it from, that's just one more way that we are different, but that doesn't make any difference. [Gail, 3656-3659]
Heteronormative Orientation		
Accepting Heteronormativity	Some parents accepted heteronormative language (intentionally or unintentionally) by using predominantly heteronormative language.	I tailor those talks to heterosexuality. I haven't needed to offer alternatives yet. … It's just so very apparent that she's [daughter] heterosexual. We've had no need to have it any other way. [Dorothy, 3357-3360]
Resisting Heteronormativity Through Gender-Neutral Terms	Other gay and lesbian parents actively resisted using heteronormative language by purposefully integrating gender inclusive terms and pronouns.	I would always try to use gender free terms, but it was really difficult because that's not how we're accustomed. Even being gay, that's not how we're accustomed to talking. But I did try to make a conscious effort to be open ended on that and not put stereotypes on them. [Gail, 3704-3707]

mother recalls her biological daughter's conversation and coming out narrative. Kaitlin

describes her daughter's initiated conversation about her orientation and the

communication between them:

> The first time that she told me that she kissed a girl. I was like 'Oh, so do you not
>
> like boys?' 'No, I like boys too.' So we started talking about what it meant to be
>
> bi and that it's ok, you can like boys and you can like girls. There's nothing
>
> wrong with that. Whatever you choose to be and whoever you choose to be with,
>
> we're going to love you the same. [4466-4469]

Kaitlin reiterated acceptance of her daughter's sexual orientation, regardless of how she

chooses to identify. Although Kaitlin's daughter displays characteristics of non-

heteronormativity, or specifically bisexuality, many participants' children chose to "come

out" to their children as heterosexual. For example, Dorothy explains that she and her

family use humor as a means of navigating the concept of heteronormative "coming out

narratives". Dorothy, a 54-year-old lesbian mother, describes how her heterosexual

daughter specifically "came out" as straight and her reactional juxtaposition of a parent

reacting to a child's "traditional" coming out narrative:

> She [daughter] told us explicitly, when she was talking about her group of friends,
>
> "So and so identifies as this, and of course I identify as heterosexual." I've said to
>
> her before that it was kind of a running joke, you know I'm going to accept you
>
> no matter what, even if you're straight I'll still love you *(laughs),* which put a
>
> chuckle in her. [3349-3352]

Both Kaitlin and Dorothy's reactions and reiteration of acceptance regardless of the

child's orientation were common reactions. Similarly, Rachel, a 51-year-old lesbian

mother, outlines her daughter's anxiety about coming out as heterosexual. Rachel's reaction as supportive and lighthearted put her daughter at ease with her "coming out narrative":

> One time she came home, this was before she was sexually active I think, at least with partners, and she was very serious and she asked me, "Are you going to be upset if I'm straight?" (*Laughs*) I said, "Why would I be upset if you are straight?" She said, "I don't know some of my friends who are gay their parents are upset because they're gay, and I have lesbian parents and I'm just wondering if you're going to be upset that I'm straight." I'm like *(scoff, laugh)* "No! Absolutely not." So she was relieved about that. [3999-4004]

Although Rachel's daughter displayed anxiety and fear regarding explicitly stating her heterosexuality, many parents and families communicate openly about it using humor to bring light to the contrast of heterosexual and homosexual "coming out narratives". For example, Anna's family continues to joke about the concept of "raising their children to be gay". After Anna's oldest two sons explicitly came out as heterosexual to their parents, their youngest son, Matt, who is eight years old, has not yet directly "come out" as a specific sexual orientation. Anna and her family poke fun at society's stereotype and misconception of gay parents "raising" children to be gay and lesbian:

> Yeah and he said it jokingly from the very beginning, "I'm very sorry to have to tell you that I think I'm straight." We joke about it all the time. We say, "Matt is our last hope, we really hope that we can raise Matt to be gay" *(laughing)*. We tell people, heterosexual families, we talk all the time about, "We're really, really hoping! We're trying to raise a gay kid here. So far we're 0/2. We got this last

one who's not really of age yet, so we're really crossing our fingers." And they

know it's a big gag bit that we don't really care. We do have a lot of fun with

turning societies view of sexuality on its head. [2723-2729]

Participants, such as Anna, used their children's "coming out narratives" as a way of

initiating the discussion of sexual orientation, and understanding their children's specific

orientations. Parents often utilized humor as a communication tool to negotiate and

challenge stereotypes about the sexual orientation of children of gay parents.

Additionally many parents used these conversations to reify acceptance, love, and

support for their children regardless of sexual orientation. Beyond children's "coming out

narratives", many parents navigated sexual orientation by "normalizing" the various

forms of orientation within conversations with their children.

"Normalizing" Sexual Orientation

Although the term "normal" may insinuate that some behaviors or orientations are

"abnormal", some participants communicated that they sought to make a variety of

sexual orientations a common and natural variation for people; thus, "normalizing" the

concept of multiple orientations as well as the act of communicating about them. This

type of communication act was represented as an attempt to make sexual orientation

another form of accepted variant of individuals. The act of talking about sexual

orientations often reduced the concept of stigma surrounding the conversation.

Ultimately parents sought to make the act of discussing sexual orientation common,

usual, and unremarkable, easing any tension that children and parents alike may have in

discussing sexual orientation in the future. For example, Gail, a 53-year-old lesbian

mother with two biological children from a previous heterosexual marriage describes

discussing sexual orientation, even prior to coming out as lesbian later in life to her children:

> It was never a big deal. It was just something that we talked about when we talked about people being different. Some people are black, white, chubby, skinny. Some people are gay. Some people are straight. So I always approached it from, that's just one more way that we are different, but that doesn't make any difference. [3656-3659]

Gail placed sexual orientation among a variety of other variations of people, allowing her and her children to reduce the stigma surrounding sexual orientation, and discuss this freely as one of many ways people are unique. Beyond the concept of "normalizing" sexual orientation as an identity, some parents normalized the act of communicating about sexual orientation by means of bringing up the conversations or stories about sexual orientation repeatedly. Participants, such as Thomas, used the act of communicative repitition and retelling narratives of sexual orientation as a way of normalizing the topic. Thomas, a 52-year-old gay father, and his partner Michael a 54-year-old gay father, describe reiterating their personal stories of sexual orientation to their children over and over again:

> We talk about how the sexual pendulum swings. Both Michael and I were at different times engaged to marry women. So we both were late coming out. They [children] can recite our stories, because I think we've hammered into them how sexual expression can develop. [2070-2073]

By repeating the conversation of multiple variations of sexual orientation and discussing it frequently, both Michael and Thomas were able to make conversations of sexual

orientation a normal and common topic of discussion within their family. The act of "normalizing" sexual orientation appeared throughout participants interviews. Similarly, many parents reported addressing the assumption of heteronormativity with their children's sexual orientations. Parents addressed the concept of heteronormative orientation by both accepting the heteronormative communication with their children, or actively deviating from a heteronormative orientation.

Heteronormative Orientation

Social heteronormativity addresses the presumed assumption that people are heterosexual in nature. Communicated heteronormativity manifests itself through multiple topics, conversations, and actions. Within this study, gay and lesbian parents indicated that they addressed heteronormative assumptions with their children in two ways: by accepting heteronormativity and assuming that their children align with heterosexual orientations, or actively resisting heteronormativity by purposefully challenging heteronormative language and communication with their children. First, some parents displayed accepting heteronormativity by assuming that their children align with heterosexual orientation.

Accepting heteronormativity. Some parents displayed communicative acts of assumed heteronormativity. For example, Dorothy, a 54-year-old lesbian mother, discusses assuming her daughter was heterosexual. It is important to note here, that although Dorothy's interview revealed that her daughter did explicitly state her heterosexuality through a heterosexual "coming out narrative" as indicated above, here, Dorothy is describing assumed heterosexual orientation about her daughter prior to the conversation of her daughter explicitly stating her sexual orientation to her parents.

Dorothy describes having always communicated with her daughter assuming her heterosexual orientation. Although Dorothy acknowledged through her interview her belief that orientation is not stagnant, and can change and develop throughout a lifetime, here she explains how she communicated with her daughter about relationships and sex prior to her daughter's coming out narrative:

> I tailor those talks to heterosexuality. I haven't needed to offer alternatives yet. I always said early on, "Whatever you decide or you feel, it's not a choice, so whatever you end up identifying as, we can have that talk." It's just so very apparent that she's [daughter] heterosexual. We've had no need to have it any other way. [3357-3360]

Although Dorothy's daughter later indicated through her coming out narrative that she is heterosexual, Dorothy's description outlines the assumption that she is prior to having an explicit conversation indicating otherwise. Other participants, such as Nathaniel, also assumed their children were heterosexual unless otherwise indicated. Interestingly, Nathaniel, a 61-year-old gay father, never explicitly asked his children about their orientation, but rather assumed heterosexual unless told otherwise. Nathaniel indicated throughout his interview that he communicated about sex and relationships through a heteronormative approach, while simultaneously creating a supportive relationship with his children if they ever wanted to explicitly state they were not heterosexual:

> I didn't talk about their sexual orientation, but they know that I am gay. That's personal and if they bring that up, that doesn't matter to me. They know that doesn't matter to me. I wouldn't want to put them on the spot. That's a question I would never ask my kids or anyone else's kids. [5369-5385]

By explicitly guiding the conversation within a heterosexual assumption unless their

children explicitly state otherwise, parents reify a heteronormative communication act

within PCSC. Other participants within this study indicated actively resisting

heteronormativity through the purposeful and intentional inclusion of gender neutral

termenology with their children.

Resisting heteronormativity by using gender-neutral terms. Although some

parents enacted heteronormative approaches towards talking about sexual orientation,

some parents actively resisted heteronormative communication with their children.

Marcus, a 29-year-old gay father, discusses navigating resisting heteronormative

communication with his partner who unintentionally engages in that form of

communication with their daughter:

> My partner will sometimes use the term 'him', or 'you're going to meet a boy'.
>
> He has the mindset of heterosexuality still. He and I have talked about this and I
>
> tell him to be a little bit more careful, but I think sometimes he noncognitively
>
> defaults to that language because he's utilized that language for such a long time.
>
> He's conditioned to it. It used to think that way as well, but now I've consciously
>
> unconditioned myself. So now I use a lot more gender neutral terms. [2415-2421]

Marcus' purposeful choice to resist heteronormative language in discussing PCSC with

their daughter in contrast to the ingrained and unintentional heteronormativity apparent in

his partner's language allowed for sexual orientation to remain open for their daughter.

Gay and lesbian parents indicated that resisting heteronormative language was difficult

and a cognitive choice. For example, Gail, a 53-year-old lesbian mother, articulated the

effort it takes to consciously include gender inclusive, and sexual orientation inclusive language in talking to her daughter, Nichole:

> So instead of asking if Nichole had a boyfriend, I would say 'someone special'. So I would always try to use gender free terms, but it was really difficult because that's not how we're accustomed. Even being gay, that's not how we're accustomed to talking. But I did try to make a conscious effort to be open ended on that and not put stereotypes on them. [3704-3707]

Consciously utilizing inclusive language regarding sexual orientation was repeated by multiple participants, even though enacting that inclusive language could be difficult. Lexi, a 35-year-old lesbian mother, displayed utilizing gender inclusive language even beyond sexual orientation. Lexi's communication with her five-year-old gender queer daughter displays placing agency on her daughter with regards to preferred displays of gender performance, pronoun choice, and even gender identity:

> She's very gender fluid. She tells people her name is Ryan sometimes. She loves to wear boys' clothes and boys' underwear. I don't know what she will grow into, but she definitely is not cisgender. So I just ask questions like how do you feel or who are you today. She'll say, "Well I'm a boy I'm a girl", and I just say, "Ok" and leave it alone. So she knows it's an option. We haven't gone so far as to call her a he, because she hasn't asked us to do that. [3606-3609]

Here, Lexi's communication with her daughter resists heteronormative language, behavior, and even performance. Lexi allows her daughter to define her gender, sexual orientation, and sexual identity herself, rather than implying or suggesting particular behaviors or styles of communication for her. Additionally, Chloe, a 40-year-old lesbian

mother of seven-year-old daughter, Emma, discusses providing her daughter with the agency she needs to identify her own sexual orientation rather than inferring through traditional heteronormative language:

> So I think a lot of our chats involve choice and how it's perfectly fine if she likes boys, girls, or both, if she has one sweetheart or many sweethearts. That giving her a sense of agency over her future romantic or sexual relationships, I think that's really important. [2986-2989]

Chloe provides her daughter with the rhetorical power to describe, define, and articulate her own sense of sexual orientation and romantic or sexual interests. Gay and lesbian parents' communication addresses sexual orientation during PCSC in a variety of ways. In order to fully comprehend the impacts of these discussions, I provide a summary and discussion of the findings regarding how gay and lesbian parents discuss sexual orientation.

Summary and Discussion of Chapter Five

Within this chapter, I provided findings on how specifically gay and lesbian parents navigate discussing sexual orientation within PCSC with their children. Significant amounts of previous research has dedicated inquiry on the communicated "coming out" narrative of multiple family members such as: LGBTQ children coming out to their parents (e.g., Armesto & Weisman, 2001; D'amico, Julien, Tremblay, & Chartrand, 2015; Denes & Afifi, 2014; Machado, 2015), gay and lesbian parents coming out to their children (e.g., Breshears, 2010; Breshears & Braithwaite, 2014; Breshears & DiVerniero, 2015; Tasker & De Simone, 2010), and the coming-out process of gay grandfathers to their families (Fruhauf, Ornel, & Jenkins; 2009). Although significant

research has specified our knowledge of coming out narratives specifically within family strucutures, little other attention has been paid to how sexual orientation is discussed within parent child sex communication. As the majority of our research has investigated coming out narratives of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer individuals, little attention has been paid to how the topic of sexual orientation manifests itself in family structures beyond the coming out story of non-heterosexual people. This project aims to understand how gay and lesbian parents navigate the conversation of sexual orientation when talking with their children about sex and sex communication. To follow, I offer a summary of each category of findings as well as provide discussion and implications for each.

Children's "Coming Out Narratives"

It is common for gay and lesbian individuals to craft and impliment their own "coming out" narrative when disclosing their non-heterosexual orientation to family and friends. However, this study found that many children of gay and lesbian parents found the need to disclose their sexual identity, often as heterosexual. Fedewa, Black, and Ahn's (2015) meta-analysis of existing research surrounding children with same-sex parents indicates that existing research states that children raised by gay and lesbian parents are no more likely to become gay, lebian, bisexual, or genderqueer than children raised by hterosexual parents. Only three participants in this study indicated that their children identified as genderqueer, bisexual, or transgender, none of which indicated that their children have disclosed gay or lesbian identities. One that note, a large proportion of participants indicated that their children, most of which identify as heterosexual, still reported providing a "coming out narrative" to their parents.

These narratives serve an important rhetorical function. By providing the verbal disclosure of heterosexual, bisexual, or genderqueer, children of gay and lesbian parents recognize that there are multiple forms of sexual orientation, and those orientations are personal. Children gained agency by disclosing and verbalizing how they identified as a personal attribute that they alone could identify. Stating these narratives out loud to family members displays that children of gay and lesbian parents recognize that sexual orientation is not hereditary, nor is it a learned behavior. Additionally, these heterosexual coming out narratives serve as an important juxtaposition to non-heterosexual coming out narratives. By participating in the same communication act that many LGBTQ individuals participate in, these heterosexual children display some similarities as well as differences between homosexual individuals' coming out narratives. For example, parents such as Rachel recalled that their children had anxiety about the disclosure to parents. Rachel's daughter was nervous about her mother's reaction to her disclosure of heterosexuality and relieved at the positive response, indicating that she was experiencing uneasiness and nervousness regarding the disclosure. Although some participants's children displayed apprehension about the disclosure, other participants used these coming out narratives through a humorous or perhaps satirical lense. Parents such as Dorothy and Anna indicated in their interviews that their children had a "running joke" about coming out as heterosexual, or that their disclosure was a "big gag", or a repeated communication that resulted in lighthearted humor for the sake of "turning society's view of sexuality on its head".

This lighthearted humorous enactment of coming out narratives poses a significant difference between heterosexual children's coming out narratives and

homosexual children's coming out narratives. This is not to suggest that all non-heterosexual coming out narratives must be traumatic and serious, but rather indicates that the sociocultural pressure and stigma surrounding heterosexuality is not present for heterosexual chidren's coming out narratives, suggesting that these acts may be seen as more humorous because the impacts outside the family are far less significant. Future research would be warrented in investigating the specific act of heterosexual individuals' coming out narratives and disclosure of heterosexuality. While this particular finding suggests that gay and lesbian parents discuss sexual orientation reactionally, after their children initiate the disclosure of their own sexual orientation, other findings indicate that parents also initiate conversations surrounding sexual orientation by "normalizing" the topic itself.

"Normalizing" Sexual Orientation

Participants in this study indicated that the repetition of conversations surrounding sexual orientation aimed to "normalize" the conversation. The term "normal" may hold heavy rhetorical implications surrounding what is acceptable, appropriate, and more importantly what deviates from "normal" as being unacceptable and abnormal. Although this term carries significant weight, the phrase is utilized here to suggest that parents attempted to make the conversation surrounding sexual orientation more approachable to children, reducing some of the social stigma surrounding the topic itself. Parents did this by combinging sexual orientation in one of the multiple ways that people are unique and individual including comparisons to weight or race, as done by Gail. The inclusion of sexual orientation in other visible differences between people, suggests that sexual orientation is one of the nonvisible variations between people. Connecting the visible

and nonvisible variations of people allows parents to include sexual orientation in a way that children are more able to recognize sexual orientation as one of many things that vary between individuals.

Additionally, the indication that parents discuss sexual orientation frequently with their children reduced the rarety of the discussion. By making this particular topic a common and frequent inclusion of regular communication with their children, the topic itself becomes a more approachable and available area of inquiry and discussion. Rather than indicating that any one particular type of sexual orientation is "normal", such as heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, etc., parents include various forms of sexual orientation as the norm. By reframing the converstaion to not just include heterosexual sexual orientation, but rather mutliple types of sexual orientations, parents normalize the differences and variations rather than the assumption that most individuals identify a particular way regarding sexual orientation. This reshapes the assumption that the normal sexual orientation is heterosexual, thus reducing heteronormativity. Regarding heteronormative communication and language, many gay and lesbian parents indicated that they face the issue of heterosexually in two distinct ways: some participants accepted or participated in heteronormative assumptions with communication, and others purposefully and actively resisted heteronormative language.

Heteronormative Orientation

The assumption that all or most individuals that one enteracts with are heterosexual is heteronormativity. This communicative act reduces the visibility and agency of various other forms of sexual orientation. Thus, many gay and lesbian parents addressed the social assumption of heteronormativity through various ways. Some gay

and lesbian parents indicated that they did not resist heteronormative language when discussing sex and sexual orientation with their children

Accepting heteronormativity. This finding does not indicate that gay and lesbian parents are purposefully exclusive of alternative forms of sexual orientation by only assuming and addressing heterosexual activity with their children, but rather indicates that gay and lesbian parents, like all individuals, may assume that their children align with heterosexual tendencies. For instance, Dorothy's daughter did actively engage in a "coming out" narrative, and she indicated to her parents that she aligned with a heterosexual orientation; however, prior to this conversation, Dorothy recalls assuming her daughter's heterosexual tendencies and only addressing discussions of sex and sexual activity through a heterosexual approach. Although this does tailor these discussions to the presumed information her daughter may engage in, the assumption prior to a disclosure of heterosexuality does enact heteronormative assumptions. Additionally, these parents may have excluded discussions of a variety of orientations that could enhance understanding or provide additional information to children. Dorothy indicated that she tailored her discussions to heterosexuality, with the assumption that her daughter was heterosexual, while simultaniously stating that when or if she changed her mind, they would have different discussions at that time. This may indicate that some participants assumed heterosexuality until literally told otherwise. An interesting note here, is that Dorothy's daughter did later "come out" as heterosexual.

Similarly, Nathaniel stated that he did not address his children's sexual orientation at all, but rather discussed sex, sexual activity, and relationships to his children through a heteronormative lens. Again, Nathaniel indicated that he would not ask his children their

sexual orientation, but rather leave room for them to disclose it to them if and when they wished. With the lack of disclosure of sexual orientation by his children, Nathaniel assumed heterosexuality and tailored his conversations regarding PCSC through a heteronormative lens. This is not to state that these parents or participants were purposefully exclusive, but rather they too are able to engage in heteronormtive assumptions regarding their children. Although some parents indicated purposefully or unitnentionally engaging in heteronormative assumptions about their children, many other parents actively and very purposefully resisted heteronormative assumptions mostly through the use of gender inclusive language.

Resisting heteronormativity by using gender-neutral terms. Although some parents represented engaging in heteronormative assumptions about their children prior to their disclosure regarding their sexual orientation, many other parents actively resisted heteronormative communication with their child. This was often done through the conscious use of gender neutral terms when discussion potential romantic partnerships. Participants such as Gail and Chloe indicated using gender neutral terms for their children's potential romantic partners through terms such as "someone special" or "sweethearts" respectively. The gender inclusive term allowed children the space to conceptualize a romantic partner without the heteronormative assumptions of implying a potential romantic or sexual partner to be of the opposite sex. As Chloe indicates this provides children with the agency to understand, view, and visualize partners that align with their romantic or sexual interests. Additionally Gail points out that this type of communicationw as a conscious choice, meaning this was an active resistance to the type of heteronormative language that is very apparent throughout social views and language.

The idea that gay and lesbian parents are also influenced by the social connotation of heteronormative language is represented by parents such as Gail and Marcus who indicat that heteronormative language is so common in daily lives that gay and lesbian parents too may be accustomed to speaking heteronormatively. Heteronormativity can be so commonly engrained within daily communication that the recognition of the term and it's affects must first be present prior to the choice to actively resist them. It's critical to note that the participants within this study, particularly the participants who indicated actively resisting heteronormativity through purposeful gender inclusive language, are highly educated. All participants noted within this section have a minimum of an Associates Degree, and multiple participants have received terminal degrees in their field. This may suggest that the parents who are actively resisting heteronormative language, may be doing so as a result of being highly educated, understanding the term itself and knowing the possible future impliations of heteronormative language. Future research investigating the effects of education and the use of gender inclusive language specifically within gay and lesbian parents and PCSC would further our understanding on how sexual orientation and heteronormativity is addressed within parent child sex communiation.

Chapter Six: Results and Discussion of Research Question Four

Within this chapter, I provide findings regarding how gay and lesbian parents communicate with one another in preparation for PCSC. The intention of this particular research was to understand how, if at all, same-sex partners divided responsibility and communicated with one another in regards to what type of communication regarding sex and sexuality they would provide their children prior to those conversations happening. After conducting the interviews, the participants' experiences and findings indicated that many same-sex parents' conversations reach far beyond just communicating with one another and their children. These conversations often reach far beyond to include multiple people and resources within a child's life, regardless of their sexual orientation. Additionally, the majority of participants indicated that they were not just communicating with their same-sex partner, but also relying on multiple sources such as additional family members as well as literature. Gay and lesbian parents communicated with their partners, as well as other members of their lives, regarding PCSC by 1) serving as gatekeepers of information, 2) maintaining a "united front" with partners and parents regarding PCSC, 3) utilizing outside resources. These outside resources were enacted through parents' consultation of a) people and b) literature. Table 5 contains an explanation and example of each of the themes emerging from Research Question 4. Finally, to conclude this chapter, I offer a detailed discussion of the findings and implications of results emerging from Research Question 4. First, parents enacted gatekeeping as a means of preparing for PCSC.

Table 5

Results: How Gay and Lesbian Parents Conversed With One Another In Preparation for PCSC

Theme	Explanation	Examples
Gatekeepers	Parents often served as gatekeepers of information to their children. This included keeping personal information disclosed by their children from other family members as well as requesting other family members to provide information to their children related to sex communication.	There have been a couple things where I have asked his father to talk to him about as well. Particularly about male bodies, because I don't know a whole lot about that. But it definitely felt like I had to ask for that conversation. I wanted his dad to bring it up so he would know he was supported in both houses with these kinds of topics. [Brenda, 843-851]
United Front	Gay and lesbian parents often modified their individual opinions or banded together in terms of providing a unified story or message to their children regarding PCSC.	I had to modify my opinion about dating in front of them because we were different. I always wanted us to be on the same page. I wanted the kids to see us as a united front. This isn't the only time I've had to modify my opinion about something so that the two of us can be united. [Michael, 2119-2121]
Outside Resources		
People	Participants indicated seeking trusted individuals outside of the family structure to discuss sex and sexuality with their children.	Personally, when they start talking about heterosexual sex, because I am lifelong lesbian and I'm not sure that I can answer those questions the best, because I don't have any direct experience with that. I want to give them someone I trust who they can talk to about it. At the same time I hope they don't think that it's a waste of time to ask me because I'm not the best person to ask. [Theresa, 1156-1159]

| *Literature* | Literature such as textbooks and children's books were often provided to children in order for them to gain information about sex and sexuality. Parents often read this material with their children, or allowed them to read it privately. | I have the gender book for kids and they are illustrated. … I read the books with them. They read the books. Just like me they tend to reread something a million times in a row until they leave the book. So they're constantly in the book they're tearing it around they're fighting it out. So these things they carry with them everywhere and we talk about them all the time. [Linda, 1794-1800] |

Gatekeepers

During PCSC, many gay and lesbian parents reported that they found out information about their children's gender identity, sexual orientation, relationship status, and sexual experience that children confided in their children. One of the common reactions from parents was deciding whom they should reveal this information to, or when to keep the information between themselves and their child. In this way, parents served as gatekeepers of their child's private information related to gender, sexuality, and sexual activity, making the decisions of who would be allowed to receive that information, or who should be kept away from it. For example, Rachel recalls withholding some information from her daughter's father after her daughter, Danielle, just broke up with her boyfriend. Rachel was concerned for her daughter's well being and knew Danielle wanted emotional support during her breakup. Rachel discussed in her interview that she and Danielle's father have a very strong and friendly co-parenting relationship, but Rachel also wanted to respect the privacy of her daughter's specific breakup details:

> I would never tell him [child's father] anything unless Danielle told me it was ok
> to tell him. When I called him to tell him she was upset, I didn't tell him she had
> sex with this guy and they were broken up and she was devisted. I just said so
> and so broke up with her and she's really sad and I just wanted to let you know. I
> wouldn't reveal any information. We [child's father] talked regularly, so I would
> say, "Danielle's dating this guy and we don't know where it's going to go, have
> you talked to her?" We were always on the same page on what sort of messages
> to send. [4085-4093]

Rachel describes withholding specific details about her daughter's relationship with her

boyfriend from her father that were insignificant to the larger parenting goal of providing

emotional support. At the same time, she did include Danielle's father on some basic

information regarding Danielle's relationship termination. Rachel explicitly states that

she would never reveal any private information about Danielle's relationships or

sexuality and sexual activity without explicit permission from her daughter to reveal that

information to other people. Similarly, Brenda, a 39-year-old queer mother articulated

respecting information boundaries of her son, Greg, who had initial apprehension with

asking questions regarding sex and sexuality to Brenda's partner. Brenda had Greg from

a previous heterosexual relationship and she and Greg are both living with her current

partner. Brenda explains being a gatekeeper of her son's information regarding questions

Greg has during PCSC:

> I think we're very much on the same page. There was a period of time where
>
> Greg would be asking me questions and it was just weird for a little bit about
>
> where is the boundary of sharing Greg's questions with my partner and then Greg
>
> not asking my partner, but pretty quickly my son has started directly asking
>
> questions to my partner as well. [827-830]

By allowing her son to decide if and when to initiate an open dialogue with her partner,

Brenda respects his privacy by not immediately sharing the information she has with

other people. Parents such as Brenda and Rachel displayed gatekeeper tendencies by

respecting the privacy of their children, but allowing other individuals into their lives and

providing them only necessary information needed to maintain a relationship while

respecting boundaries and privacy. Similarly, Marcus, a 29-year-old gay father, and his

partner serve as gatekeepers by opening the gates of communication with their child, Caroline's biological mother. Marcus explains that he feels it is his responsibility to include his daughter's mother in the types of communication and information their daughter is receiving:

> Every single time there is a question or Caroline approaches us and wants to know more about sex, my partner and I really want to be transparent with her mom as well. So we tell her the specifics about her questions and our responses. Just so there's no room for conflict. Just so her mom knows the kind of communication we have with our daughter and how we speak to her at home. [2366-2370]

Marcus and his partner attempt to open the channels of communication by providing Caroline's mother with the conversations regarding sex and sexuality that occur within their household. Additionally, Brenda, a 39-year-old queer mother, specifically asks her son's father to begin or continue dialogues with her son surrounding specific PCSC topics. Here, Brenda explains that she serves as a gatekeeper not only of her child's private information, but of what type of information reaches her child. Brenda specifically requests a conversation from a trusted source, her son's father, to suppliment and support the existing communication her son recieves:

> There have been a couple things where I have asked his father to talk to him about as well. Particularly about male bodies, because I don't know a whole lot about that. But it definitely felt like I had to ask for that conversation. I wanted his dad to bring it up so he would know he was supported in both houses with these kinds of topics. [843-851]

Participants such as Marcus and Brenda indicate that gay and lesbian parents serve as gatekeepers by allowing or requesting information to be given to their children by other sources beyond themselves. Gatekeepers within this study both kept their children's information private as well as requested additional information to come through to their children regarding PCSC. Beyond managing boundaries by serving as gatekeepers, some gay and lesbian parents indicated that they purposefully negotiated a united front in front of their children regarding information, answering questions, and expectations during PCSC.

United Front

Some parents discussed purposefully preparing for PCSC and other participants indicated that their experience was to engage in PCSC more spontaneously than strategically with their children. The majority of participants indicated that whether spontaneous or planned, it was very important for gay and lesbian parents to present a "united front" in front of their children. This particular experience involves agreeing with the other partner and providing verbal and nonverbal communication that supports the other and suggests a singular agreed upon message. Enacting a "unified front" suggests that both parents are sending the same concurrent and harmonious messages to their children rather than sending contradictory messages regarding sex and sexuality. For instance, Daphney, a 54-year-old lesbian mother, discusses purposeful communication with her divorced partner Dorothy regarding their daughter Miranda:

> I'll talk to Dorothy first and then we'll talk to Miranda together. So that one of us doesn't seem like the bad guy. We want her to know that we're a unified front. That she can always talk to either one of us. [4640-4642]

Daphney and her partner Dorothy live in separate households and share equal time with their daughter Miranda. Daphney and Dorothy both indicated that they share occassional lunches, phone calls, and frequent conversations surrounding their daughter Miranda. By frequently sharing information with one another, they are allowed to create an agreed upon message and reaction to Mirdanda's questions and behaviors. This eliminates conflicting messages from multiple households or parents, but rather reinforces the same message from multiple sources, creating a unified front of parenting.

Parents such as, Theresa, suggested using strategic moments of being a united front with their partners. Theresa, a 41-year-old lesbian mother, suggests that she believes that her and her partner, Diane's, differing opinions can be beneficial for their children to hear in order to hear conflicting ideas and form their own stances on issues. However, Theresa states that large issues, such as discussing their children's sperm donor and their conception stories, as well as a recent encounter when her seven and a half-year-old daughter accidentally stumbled upon an adult website on the family computer, required a united front from both parents.

> Diane and I both use different language. Although we have somewhat different views and opinions, I think it's important for both of the girls to hear those ideas. The big things come up like, when do we tell them about the donor or when do we tell them about this, because we want to be on the same page about it. When we had the first big donor talk, we sat down as a family and talked together…When those issues come up we just make a point of being a united front. Like with my experience this weekend with my oldest daugher. I said "I'm going to talk to you about this now, but I will be talking to Diane about this, because I don't think they

should think that either parent is going to treat them differently. They can't play

us." (*Laughs*). [1115-1123]

Theresa's example displays both being a strategic united front with her partner Diane regarding significant issues with their children, as well as communicative gatekeeping by providing her partner necessary information regarding her discussion with her daughter about viewing adult content on the computer.

Although some participants, such as Theresa, viewed parents' differing opinions as beneficial for children to hear, some participants, such as Michael and his partner Thomas, stated that editing and altering opinions in front of children to send the same message was more important. For example, Michael, a 54-year-old gay father states that he had to verbally edit his opinion about what appropriate dating behavior was in front of his children because his parter had a differing opinion. Rather than send mixed signals, Michael adapted in order to become a united front with his partner:

> I had to modify my opinion about dating in front of them because we were
>
> different. I always wanted us to be on the same page. I wanted the kids to see us
>
> as a united front. This isn't the only time I've had to modify my opinion about
>
> something so that the two of us can be united. [2119-2121]

Michael's description places higher significance of a communal message over offering differing opinions regarding PCSC. While some gay and lesbian parents conversed with one another regarding creating a cohesive message, other participants indicated relying on outside resources such as individuals outside of their family and literature to inform sex communication with their children.

Outside Resources

The originally drafted research question is aimed to understand how gay and lesbian parents communicate with their same-sex partners regarding parent child sex communication. However, the interview results indicate that many parents actually purposefully seek outside resources beyond their same-sex partners or family members. Many family members seek information from people outside of their immediate family structure such as friends or trusted mentors. Literature was also used in multiple gay and lesbian headed households as a tool to provide children with information and narratives regarding sex communication. First, many gay and lesbian parents often reported wanting to provide or find a trusted person beyond a parent figure to discuss sex and sexuality with their children.

People. During the interview process, many participants reported unprompted that they would prefer to have a trusted individual, beyond their child's parents, discuss sex, relationships and sexuality with their children. These parents sought an outside source that they trusted to supplement or reiterate messages they have told their children during PCSC. For example, Chloe, a 40-year-old lesbian mother, describes her experience suggesting that she will encourage her daughter to talk to her trusted godmother, should her daughter be heterosexual:

> I think if she does identify as straight, I'd want her to have someone to chat with about navigating relationships both emotional and sexual with young men, which would not necessarily be her mothers. Personally I dated boys through high school and Grace did until after college, but we may not be the best sources of advice for that. We do have close friends, her godmother is a really terrific

> woman and she's straight and I would very happily have her chat with Emma,
>
> she's definitely that sort of chosen family. [3211-3218]

Chloe articulates that her daughter's sexual orientation may dictate the use of an outside resource. Similarly, Theresa, a 41-year-old lesbian mother, suggests that an outside resource or trusted mentor may be necessary if her daughters begin to engage in a heterosexual relationship. Theresa describes her and her partner's lack of experience with heterosexual sex acts as a rationale for hoping her children find someone to discuss those acts with:

> Personally, when they start talking about heterosexual sex, because I am lifelong
>
> lesbian and I'm not sure that I can answer those questions the best, because I
>
> don't have any direct experience with that. I want to give them someone I trust
>
> who they can talk to about it. At the same time I hope they don't think that it's a
>
> waste of time to ask me because I'm not the best person to ask. [1156-1159]

Theresa and Chloe's experiences both articulate that their perceived lack of experience would be a detriment when discussing heterosexual acts or relationships with their children. Although some parents displayed concern about discussing heterosexual acts with their children, others felt an outside source would better reduce the amount of embarrassment common within parent child sex communication. Audrey, a 49-year-old lesbian mother of two children discusses the embarrassment on behalf of parents as well as children when discussing PCSC. Rather, Audrey suggests that trusted individuals outside of parents would serve as important resources for children to receive information regarding sex communication:

I sort of think the best person to have these conversations is a trusted adult outside the family, but not the parent, because it's an awkward conversation. Like an aunt or an uncle or a family friend; a person that they can have the conversation with. Her aunt that lives an hour away is who I'm hoping she turns to. [645-649]

Audrey reported hoping that her children turn to a specific person regarding information about sex and sexuality; however, other parents suggested they actively arranged that conversation for their children, rather than hoping their children turn to them naturally. For example, Sandra, a 56-year-old lesbian mother, articulates that she and her partner have had active discussions about finding an outside family member for their son, Stephen, to talk to. Sandra and her partner have actively chosen a family friend, Frank, to have those discussions with their son:

He's embarrassed. He doesn't want to have the conversation. One of the things that we are contemplating is we have a really good friend, he's a good guy, very macho guy, very likes baseball and football and stuff like that. Stephen likes him. I think we're going to be asking Frank to go out and have a pop with him and talk about this stuff. I think he needs to hear it from someone other than me. I think he thinks I'm too nervous and overprotective. I don't know if he's hearing everything I'm saying. I think sometimes he discounts me. So we are going to have Frank, he's 43-years-old. I think he would be a good role model for this conversation. But Stephen's very embarrassed when I bring it up. I think hearing it from another "dude". Another man I think it would be better. I think it would be heard differently. Maybe away from the house where we're not seeing them talk. It's the only guy that I trust enough to do it. [1296-1313]

Sandra and Audrey's experiences express the use of an outside source as a means to provide information as well as to spare potential embarrassment. Gay and lesbian parents also indicated using literature, specifically books targeted to youth audiences, to provide information to children regarding sex communication.

Literature. Gay and lesbian parents indicated using books as resources to supplement their conversations with their children. These books served as a way for parents to preapprove the information their children were getting, by picking out the books and reading them prior to giving them to their children, or reading them with their children as a shared activity. When children were given these books as a tool, it allowed them to read and engage with the material in private. Parents and children reading books together allowed children to ask questions and engage with the material together. Rachel, a 51-year-old lesbian mother, discusses using books and literature to supplement her daughter's knowledge on sex, gender, and sexuality as her daughter appreciated the privacy the literature allowed her:

> I always tried to initiate a very direct conversation with her, but she's actually
> more private. So what she wanted was books. She researches. I got her this
> book, *Changing Bodies Changing Lives*. I'm sure she read that very carefully.
> We just wanted to be sure she was ok and had all the information she needed.
> Those conversations were just like, "Do you have all the information you need?"
> She would just go to the science library and look at books. [3924-3931]

Rachel attempted to engage in direct face-to-face conversations, and her interview indicated that she did converse with her daughter. However, providing her literature in addition to these conversations allowed Rachel's daughter to continue learning about sex

and gender in a more private and independent manner. Although Rachel provided her daughter books to read and checked in with her knowledge level after she reads them, Brenda, a 39-year-old queer mother, provided her son with books and allowed him to ask her questions as he read. Brenda explains that she provided her 10-year-old son with literature throughout his lifetime and allowed the books to spark inquiry and questions that she would answer:

> He's starting puberty, so he's had questions about getting hair. I got him some puberty books, so sometimes he has questions about those books. If he wants more information, he uses the books. For example, he asked about wet dreams because the books were a little vague, and he wanted to know what it meant. He also has a book *It's not the Stork* and *And Tango makes three.* It has pretty detailed information about how all that works. So I guess I've mostly approached that with books and answered questions when he has them. [745-752]

Brenda made gender and sex specific literature available to her son, respectful to his age, throughout his life and allowed the narratives and information in them to teach her son. By providing resources that her son could engage with on his own time, she allows his knowledge about gender and sex to increase and positions herself as a resource of information when she answers questions based on the books.

Similarly, Theresa, a 41-year-old lesbian mother, answered the questions of her two children based on literature. Theresa used literature as a shared activity, reading the books with her daughters. This allowed Theresa to be available to answer questions while they read. After she and her daughters read together, the books were available for her daughters to engage in:

> We've always had books that have represented different families. Books that have two moms like, *And Tango makes three*, *Heather has two mommies*, and others. At that point I don't think either one of those girls could read, so it was more just looking through the pictures. They'd giggle a little bit. I will reference any resources that we have in addition to answering the specific questions but I prefer to verbally answer the question then give them something to look at to absorb on their own time. [987-993]

Theresa read with her children while still stating the importance of allowing them to engage with the material independently. Linda, a 31-year-old lesbian mother, reiterates the importance of providing literature for children. Her experience reiterates the importance of providing fun, engaging, illustrated and age appropriate literature related to gender and sex to her children. Linda, along with additional participants, read the books with her children, but enjoyed seeing her children grapple with the material individually as well:

> I have the gender book for kids and they are illustrated. They're really good for older kids or adults. I would try to purchase them all. I read the books with them. They read the books. Just like me they tend to reread something a million times in a row until they leave the book. So they're constantly in the book they're tearing it around they're fighting it out. So these things they carry with them everywhere and we talk about them all the time. [1794-1800]

Many participants indicated that they provided material for their children to read, independently or as a shared activity. However, Chloe, a 40-year-old lesbian mother, suggested that the material she bought for her daughter, Emma, was also beneficial for

her partner, Grace. Chloe reiterates that the material provided her shy partner, Grace, a starting point for Grace to engage in PCSC:

> A couple of times, I think the books also helped Grace too. If Emma has a question about the book, they can talk about it. It's good for both of them. Good illustrations and explains things in clear-cut ways without any sort of emotional fuss. I think that's helped them talk. [3167-3169]

Chloe's experience providing her daughter, and her partner, literature not only supplemented PCSC, but also helped initiate PCSC. For many gay and lesbian parents, literature addressing various topics such as various family structures, puberty, relationships, and reproduction helped children understand sex and sexuality.

Summary and Discussion of Chapter Six

Within this chapter, I provided findings regarding how, if at all, same-sex parents converse with each other in preparation for PCSC. This study found that, rather than conversing with one another, the majority of participants' experiences extend beyond their same-sex partnerships in terms of sex communication with their children. Rather than simply communicating with their same-sex partners, gay and lesbian parents utilized multiple resources and individuals when discussing sex and sexuality with their children. Gay and lesbian parents served as gatekeepers with their children, both keeping their child's questions and experiences private as well as inviting other trusted forms of communication about sex and sexuality to reach their children from parents, friends, and family members. Gay and lesbian parents strategically bound together to form a united front with their messages to their children regarding sex, relationships, and sexuality, specifically on what parents deemed large and important issues. This indicates that the

solidarity of the message and cohesive communication was at times more important than expressing differences in opinions. Finally, many gay and lesbian parents reached out beyond their same-sex partners in terms of educating and communicating with their children about sex communication. This manifested in two large forms, reaching out to other people outside the immediate family, and the use of literature and books to supplement as well as initiate PCSC conversations. First, many gay and lesbian parents served as gatekeepers with the information their children shared and received regarding PCSC.

Gatekeepers

Gay and lesbian parents within this study acted as gatekeepers of information from and to their children regarding sex communication. Many parents enacted this by not revealing information to other individuals that their children disclosed to them about their sexuality, their sexual experiences, or their sex related question to outside individuals. By doing this, gay and lesbian parents respected the privacy of their children as well as granted them agency over the information they provided their parents by only revealing that information with a child's permission. By filtering or censoring information regarding their child's sex communication to other individuals, such as other parents, grandparents, and friends, gay and lesbian parents kept information private and respected the boundaries of personal disclosure regarding sex communication with their children.

Additionally, parents did not always keep all information private from outside members of the conversation. For example, Rachel did reach out to her daughter's father and informed him of their daughter's break up, hoping to provide Danielle, their

daughter, with additional emotional support from both parents. She did not, however, disclose to Danielle's father that Danielle had been sexually active with her boyfriend, which added to the emotional influence the termination of their relationship had upon Danielle. Here Rachel disclosed strategic amounts of information to Danielle's father, but kept information regarding Danielle's sexual activity private.

An interesting connection is that Rachel indicated throughout her interview that she maintained a healthy and constant relationship with Danielle's father. He was always consulted and an active member of Danielle's life. However, Brenda, who also indicated respecting the boundaries of her son, Greg, when discussing sex and sex communication, had recently moved in with her partner. Brenda's partner lives with her and her son, Greg; however, Brenda indicated that there was a period of time when the relationship was new, where Greg would be hesitant to ask questions regarding sex and sexuality to Greg's partner directly. Here, Brenda respected Greg's privacy and hesitancy, allowing her son to ask her directly rather than sharing that information with her partner immediately. Brenda's experience indicated that through time and relationship building, Greg did begin to trust and disclose information directly to Brenda's partner.

Although some parents indicated respecting privacy and withholding information from other people regarding their PCSC with their child, some parents enacted gatekeeping by actively seeking out communication regarding sex and sexuality for their children to hear. Parents such as Brenda and Marcus specifically provide information to their child's biological parent as a means of providing information as well as requesting messages to be given to their children. For example Marcus and Brenda both discussed aspects of their experiences regarding PCSC with their children to their child's additional

biological parent. This was done as a means of requesting the same message to be heard in both households. At times gay and lesbian parents enacted gatekeeping to keep their children's information private, as well as informing other households and family members of their child's sex communication progress and education level.

An important note to make is that all of the participants who indicated utilizing gatekeeping had the biological parent of their child as a present and active member of their child's life. Whether they were enacting gatekeeping by keeping their child's personal and detailed information from their biological parent, or requesting their child's biological parent to communicate in a specified way regarding PCSC, the majority of these conversations surrounded a present and active parent outside of the same-sex parent's household. Although this act is not exclusively reserved for gay and lesbian parents who have an active biological parent involved in their child's life, all of the parents in this particular study who enacted gatekeeping tendencies happened to also have an active biological parent involved in raising and communicating with their child. This may indicate that the particular makeup of families, including the presence of absence of additional parental figures in a child's life may result in gay and lesbian parents strategically discussing and withholding information regarding their PCSC from those parents. This particular communication act also tended to represent the concept of displaying a united front from multiple members of a child's life, including all parents and parental figures.

United Front

Gay and lesbian participants within this study represented bonding together with other individuals, their same-sex partners as well we their children's biological parents, to

display a united front regarding PCSC. This particular communication act represented parents modifying or amending their individual thoughts or messages in order to reiterate a cohesive message from multiple parents. Although some parents indicated that they valued providing their children with individual opinions and stances on issues such as dating and relationships, some issues required a cohesive front from multiple parents. For example, Dorothy enacted both gatekeeping as well as a united front by telling her daughter that she would fill her partner in on the PCSC conversations they shared in order to keep a united front between both parents. By providing information to her partner, Daphney, Dorothy was both a gatekeeper as well as enforcing a cohesive message between both households. This allowed their daughter to be able to speak to both parents equally about PCSC, as Dorothy filled her partner in on the conversations happening under her care to allow their daughter to be able to speak openly with both parents and receive similar messages rather than contradicting opinions.

Although Dorothy and Daphney share equal parenting time with their daughter in different households, the concept of displaying a united front was not just reserved for parents who shared custody of their children. Theresa, for example, and her partner have been together for 11 years and both lived in the same household with their children for the entirety of their children's lives. Theresa and her partner allow individual opinions and views on some issues, however, for large discussions regarding their children's understanding of their family or their relationship with their sperm donor, Theresa and her partner make sure to share the same message, creating a united front. By discussing these large topics in a similar manner, Theresa and her partner do not leave any room for communicative disparity in the messages they share with their children regarding their

conception stories and their sperm donor. Additionally, Theresa and her partner display gatekeeping and a united front simultaneously by engaging in individual PCSC with their children and then informing their children that they will discuss their conversation with their partner so each parent is informed. Future research would be warranted in investigating which particular topics gay and lesbian parents view as important to share and modify their opinions to match that of their partners, and which topics they allow for variety and differences in messages regarding PCSC. Beyond parents engaging in a united front, many parents also indicated using additional resources outside the immediate family members to provide messages to their children about sex and sex communication.

Outside Resources

The proposed research question investigated in this chapter aimed to understand how same-sex parents communicated with one another to prepare for PCSC. Although the findings indicated that some parents served as gatekeepers of information, as well as provided a united front regarding particular messages of PCSC, many participants actually reached beyond the boundaries of their family structures to provide information to their children regarding sex communication. Utilizing outside resources occurred in two main ways; parents seeking trusted individuals outside immediate family structures to discuss sex and sexuality with their children, and parents providing literature to their children focused on sex, sexuality, and gender. First, many parents sought out individuals outside their immediate family structure to communicate with their children regarding sex and sexuality.

People. Results of this study indicate that some gay and lesbian parents express interest in seeking out a trusted individual to converse with their children about sex and sexuality. Participants expressed that this was not to replace PCSC, but as a supplemental conversation to enhance their children's knowledge and comfort levels discussing these topics. Gay and lesbian parents indicated that the people they sought out to converse with their children, or the individuals they hoped their children would turn to, were well trusted and held existing established relationships with the family. Therefore, parents were not simply hoping that their children would communicate with strangers, or individuals that they had not created mutual understanding and connections. Reasons for expressing interest in children conversing with individuals outside the immediate family structure varied.

For example, Chloe expressed hesitancy in discussing specifically heterosexual acts and relationships with her daughter if she expressed heterosexual attraction in the future. Although Chloe and her partner both have some experience with cross-sexed romantic involvement, Chloe fears that her lack of extended involvement in heterosexual relationships will hinder her ability to converse with her daughter should she express heterosexual interests. Theresa also indicated having no specific experience in heterosexual sexual activity, thus hoping her daughters find a trusted individual to communicate with heterosexual specific relationships.

Beyond parental experience with heterosexuality, some parents indicated searching for an individual to converse with their children as a result of the potential uncomfortable or embarrassing nature of parent child sex communication. Audrey indicated that she thought sex communication was best enacted by someone who was not

a parent as these conversations could be awkward, given the parent child relationship.

Sandra, similarly stated that her son, Stephen was embarrassed with these conversations

when his mother brought them up. Sandra's experience highlighted the desire for a

traditional masculine figure to converse with her son about sex and sexuality. With the

variety of reasons for parents seeking out individuals to converse with their children

about sex and sexuality, future research should investigate the parental motivations for

these conversations. Lack of experience with heterosexuality and potential

embarrassment may highlight a gay or lesbian parent's perceived ability to directly relate

to their child's heterosexual desires. Future research may also be warranted in

understanding how, if at all, the biological sex of a parent as well as a parent's sexual

orientation affects their perceived ability and comfort when discussing various aspects of

sex communication. Although some parents actively sought out additional individuals to

converse with their children, many parents also utilized literature to enhance and

supplement their children's sex education.

  Literature. This study indicates that gay and lesbian parents often provide their

children with a variety of books and literature directly relating to sex, family diversity,

and sexuality. This literature was distributed throughout a child's lifetime including

reading stories to children about family diversity and homosexuality. For instance,

multiple participants indicated the use of *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson & Parnell,

2005), an illustrated children's book describing two homosexual male penguin's search to

create a family. This particular book is targeted for children ages eight years and under.

The use of this book, and others like it, represent gay and lesbian parent's inclusion of

family diversity in literature from a young age introducing homosexuality and various family conception stories before children could even read themselves.

The use of literature as children grew older allows gay and lesbian parents specifically to provide approved information to their children, and allow children to read together or privately. This availability of information signifies that parents who provided books and materials for children to read about sex and sexuality were actively making this information accessible and approachable for children. The inclusion of this type of material provided a starting point for parents to converse with their children about sex and sexuality, as well as allowing the children to read and comprehend at their own time and interest levels.

Literature surrounding sex and sexuality allows parents to establish a shared starting point for PCSC conversations, answer questions about the material that children are reading, as well as respect the privacy and interest of their children on the topic. Literature served as a unique resource that could be a shared activity, by reading the material together, or a private activity that children engaged in independently. Additionally, it is important to note that no participants in this particular study provided literature as a replacement for PCSC, but rather a supplement to these conversations. Some parents, such as Chloe indicated that her and her partner also benefited from the use of literature as it allowed them a tangible starting place to engage in PCSC and easily discuss the concepts of what their daughter was reading. Thus, the inclusion of books and availability of information benefited children as well as parents in the enactment of PCSC.

Chapter Seven: Concluding Discussion

My central purpose of this study was to further understand how gay and lesbian parents specifically navigate and implement parent-child sex communication with their children. Although previous research explores parent-child sex communication (PCSC), the majority of this work does so specifically through a heteronormative lens, solely investigating heterosexual parents or not specifying the sexual orientation of parents as a frame of research inquiry. The majority of existing research focuses on two heterosexual parented households (e.g., Farr & Patterson, 2013), child's attitudes of gay parenting as well as social attitudes of gay parenting (e.g., Pennington & Knight, 2011), as well as the implications of gay and lesbian parenting on their child's emotional and psychological well-being (e.g., Vargas, Miller, & Chamberlain, 2012; Reed, 2013; Goldberg & Smith, 2013). The existing literature lacks specific focus on gay and lesbian parents enacted and experiences during PCSC. By addressing the purpose of this study, the findings give insight into the unique experiences of gay and lesbian parents during their enactment and reflections of their PCSC with their children.

First, I sought to understand how same-sex parents understand and enact parent-child sex communication. Included in this goal was to further understand how gay and lesbian parents defined sex communication, and what those conversations looked like in action. Second, I aimed to understand what the main topics and discourses were within gay and lesbian headed PCSC. This goal was designed to bring light to what points of discussion were included within gay and lesbian PCSC with their children. Third, I inquired how gay and lesbian parents discussed sexual orientation with their children during PCSC. Finally, I investigated how same-sex parents converse with their partners

in preparation for PCSC. Although this goal was intended to understand same-sex parent's communication with one another prior to PCSC, the results and findings indicated that many gay and lesbian parents conversed with multiple sources, including their partners, other members of their family structure, individuals outside of their family unit, as well as literature on the topic of sex and sex communication.

In this final chapter, I provide a summary of the major contributions of this project to compliment the discussion specific to each research question in the preceding chapters. Specifically, I outline the major implications this project's results have on the future investigation and understanding of parent-child sex communication as well as on gay and lesbian headed families specifically. I end this chapter with a discussion of the limitations and suggestions for future research.

The purpose of this project was not to complete a comparative analysis, nor does it intend to provide empirical evidence of the differences between gay and lesbian specific families and heterosexually headed families. However, insight can be gained by contrasting the findings of this study with the empirical findings of existent research to further understand parent-child sex communication as a whole. Thus, implications of this study on our comprehensive understanding of PCSC can be understood through three major contributions: a) understanding the similarities of heterosexual parent PCSC and gay and lesbian headed PCSC, b) identifying the unique experiences of gay and lesbian parent PCSC, and c) how gay and lesbian parent PCSC can inform and shape all PCSC research.

Similarities of Heterosexual PCSC and Gay and Lesbian PCSC

Although the focus of this study investigates the unique experiences of gay and lesbian headed families and PCSC, there are significant implications in comparing the results of this study to the existent research on predominantly heterosexual headed PCSC. For example, Martin and Luke (2010) investigated the gender variances of PCSC by specifically investigating how heterosexual mothers communicated various topics of reproduction and sex education to their children. Concurrent with Martin and Luke's (2010) findings, as well as other current research investigating communication topics of reproduction within heterosexual PCSC (e.g., El-Shaieb & Wurtele, 2009; Hicks, McRee, & Eisenberg, 2013), this study's findings also state that gay and lesbian parents communicate about the function of biology and reproduction often when discussing PCSC. Many parents in this study, as well as within the existent literature specifying heterosexual parent PCSC describe sex within sex communication with their children as a means of reproduction. As parents, regardless of parental sexual orientation, discuss sex in terms of biological reproduction and conception, this highlights the importance of transferring medically accurate, factual, and current information regarding biology. Thus, parents, regardless of sexual orientation, provide children with narratives and information shaping their understanding of the functions of their bodies, their biology, and the ways in which heterosexual conception takes place.

Beyond traditional forms of reproductive conception, parents, regardless of sexual orientation, indicated transferring messages of moral value regarding sexual activity. For example, participants in this study indicated disclosing desire for their children to engage in "safe" and "safer" sex practices, as well as discussing moral implications for engaging

in sexual activity. Previous research, primarily focused on heterosexual parent communication with heterosexual children as well as homosexual children indicated similar findings of parental suggestions and disclosure of desires for their children to engage in safe sex and a shared meaning of what safe sex practices include (e.g., Brown, Rosnick, Webb-Bradley, & Kirner, 2014; Hyde et al., 2013; LaSala, 2007). The communication of safe and safer sex practices to children is critical to establishing responsible sex practices in both children and adults, regardless of sexual orientation. The findings of this study as well as the established literature of heterosexual PCSC research conclude the majority of parents disclose desires for their children to engage in safe sex practices as well as often disclosing to their children the benefits and implications of waiting to become sexually active.

Finally, although gay and lesbian parents disclosed information and moral implications on a variety of topics regarding sex communication to their children, they simultaneously reported feelings of embarrassment or uncomfortable natures of PCSC. Thompson, Yannessa, Dunn, McGough, and Duffy (2015) reported that one of the largest barriers to heterosexual parent's frequent and open discussions with children about sex and sexuality is the discomfort and potential embarrassment on behalf of both children and parents during these conversations. This suggests that parents, regardless of sexual orientation, still face discomfort and potential embarrassment when discussing PCSC with their children. This uneasiness or embarrassment could influence the frequency or ways in which parents display acceptance of these conversations and make PCSC accessible to their children by reducing stigma surrounding the topic of sex communication itself. Although there are multiple similarities within heterosexual parent

PCSC and gay and lesbian parent PCSC populations, there are some unique distinctions that occur specifically within gay and lesbian parent PCSC that deserve recognition within our understanding of PCSC.

Unique Experiences of Gay and Lesbian PCSC

In providing insight into how gay and lesbian parents enact and navigate PCSC, findings point to unique nuances of PCSC specific to the gay and lesbian parent population. First, gay and lesbian parents often need to navigate the 'visibility' of sexual orientation within their communication about sex and sexuality with their children. 'Visibility' of sexual orientation relates to the more obvious display of same-sex parenting when discussing sex, family orientation, and sexuality. Children living in same-sex parented households are able to see family structures that stretch beyond the traditional heteronormative nuclear stereotypes of families. Thus, many questions from children, and many discussions from gay and lesbian parents often address sexual orientation or challenge heteronormativity very directly. Although heterosexual parents are able and capable of discussing heterosexuality and combating heteronormative stereotypes and language, research suggests that discussing heterosexuality at all is a very rare conversation during parent child sex communication. Heisler (2005) suggests that this was one of the least discussed topics during parent child sex communication from heterosexual parents. Parents of any sexual orientation are able to discuss homosexuality; however, the unique nature of gay and lesbian co-parenting provides visibility and normalization of a homosexual relationship. Thus, this unique experience gives parents and children a starting point to communicate about sexual orientation early on.

Additionally, gay and lesbian parents possess a unique positionality in terms of PCSC as their sexual orientation may lead them to discuss the aspect of sex beyond reproduction. Specifically, gay and lesbian parents' relationship 'visibility' may result in children inquiring about, or parents describing the purpose of sexual intimacy beyond the purpose of reproduction. Solely describing sex and the purpose of sex as an act of reproduction leaves out gay and lesbian individuals engaging in sexual activity for intimacy, relationships, or pleasure. Thus, gay and lesbian parents visibility and experiences may place them in a position to easily discuss sex in relation to pleasure and relationships and beyond solely the heteronormative reproductive purpose of sexual activity.

Finally, gay and lesbian parent PCSC often requires gay and lesbian parents to define or co-create definitions about their family structure with their children. The emphasis placed on gay and lesbian to establish conception stories, provide definitions and terminology for family members, and to continually restate their family narrative a unique vantage point that makes PCSC experiences distinct. This form of family identity narratives that many gay and lesbian parents and families develop distinctively influences PCSC; however, it is not solely unique to gay and lesbian parents. For instance, many parents and families, regardless of sexual orientation create adoption narratives (e.g., Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011), establish narratives of single motherhood or lesbian partners and the use of sperm donation (e.g., Goldberg & Scheib, 2015), or establish specific terminology to define relationships of foster families (e.g., Thomas, 2014). Although the attempt to define and reify family through communication is not inherently only

experienced by gay and lesbian parents, it is a unique positionality that does influence the manner in which gay and lesbian parents discuss PCSC.

How Gay and Lesbian PCSC Can Inform All PCSC Research

Although there are distinctive similarities and differences between heterosexual parent PCSC and gay and lesbian specific PCSC, the results of this study have significant implications on how we understand and conduct all forms of parent-child sex communication research. First, this study suggests that gay and lesbian parents navigate sexual orientation in a variety of aspects of sex communication with their children ranging from topics, to definitions, to relationship descriptions and family conception. Although the majority of participants children specifically identified as heterosexual, the explicit description and inclusion of homosexual specific topics within PCSC has the ability to expand the knowledge base of children and create a move cohesive understanding of all sex and sexuality as a whole, rather than a strictly heteronormative view. Therefore, the inclusion of sexual orientation as an included and repeated topic of conversation within PCSC as well as purposefully combatting heteronormative language may result in a more accepting, understanding, and inclusive sex education regardless of the sexual orientation of the parent or the child.

Disclosing only information about heterosexual sex to self proposed heterosexual children excludes them from a comprehensive sex education, may limit knowledge and discussion of safer sex practices for specific sexual activity, and has the potential to limit their definition and understanding of a variety of sexual preferences and practices. As parents are one of the leading sources of information as well as hold the potential for the transfer and expression of moral values related to sexual behavior and activity, the

inclusion of various topics, behaviors, and sexual orientations as worthy of discussion may instill a more understanding and inclusive attitude towards various sex communication as well as individuals of various sexual orientations.

Additionally, participants in this study expressed purposefully combating heteronormative language when talking to their children about sex and sexuality. Although many gay and lesbian parents purposefully worked to negate heteronormative viewpoints, a significant amount of those participants expressed how difficult it was to combat that language and ideology. Heteronormative language is deeply ingrained within our society and our culture, and perhaps it is equally as ingrained within our study and research of sex and sexuality. It is imperative that we as researchers critically reflect on our research questions, language, and populations of inquiry when conducting research on parent-child sex communication as well as sex communication on a broad sense. By asking questions that are inclusive of multiple populations, behaviors, attitudes, and sexual orientations, we as researchers aim to learn more about all aspects of sex communication. This study specifically poses multiple suggestions for future research regarding PCSC as well as a few limitations.

Limitations and Directions For Future Research

Although the findings from this study serve to complement the extant research on PCSC and gay and lesbian parenting, these results should be interpreted in considerations of some limitations of the study. First, my population as a whole was extremely educated, perhaps creating a bias of individuals who are aware of heteronormativity and actively engaging in ways to combat heteronormative language and stereotypes. The majority of my participants have not only completed college, but also received a variety of advanced

or terminal degrees. This may be a result of the recruitment procedures as Facebook was the primary recruiting strategy utilized, and my personal network possesses many individuals involved in advanced education from a variety of academic institutions. Additionally, this highly educated population was very aware of heteronormativity and its detriments, as well as highly educated on sex and sexuality studies. Thus, the majority of my participants indicated a positivity bias, representing parents who are eager and excited to talk about sex and sexuality with their children, rather than experiences of participants who actively avoid discussing these topics with their children as well as researchers.

The second limitation in this particular study was the lack of racial diversity of participants. Although I was able to receive a wide geographic range of participants, only three participants identified as non-white, including one Hispanic participant and two participants identifying as Black. Racial and cultural variations may have significant impacts on how parents communicate about sex and sexuality with their children. Parks, Hughes, and Matthews (2004) indicate race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation are distinct identities with overlapping qualities and implications. The combined effects of racism within lesbian and gay communities as well as homophobia in a variety of ethnic and racial communities may create distinct difficulties in disclosing sexual orientation among people of color (Morris, Waldo, & Rothblum, 2001). Thus, future research should investigate the distinctive variations in racial and cultural backgrounds in terms of parent child sex communication topics, frequency, and disclosure. Additionally, the majority of participants within this particular study identify as lesbian mothers. Only five of the 22 total participants identified as gay fathers. Although there may not be distinctive variations between lesbian mothers and gay fathers, future research may be warranted in

providing a voice to gay fathers specifically in their role and attitudes towards PCSC. The difficulty in obtaining gay fathers to participate in this study may be a result of social assumptions that females, regardless of sexual orientation, are more open to discussing personal narratives and providing storytelling and explanations of personal experiences through rapport communication. Beyond that, this may be a result of the difficulty in adoption for gay and lesbian parents, as many lesbian parents started a family through artificial insemination or an alternative form of conception rather than adoption. Gay fathers may be lacking in this particular study as a result of the legislative difficulty gay fathers face in obtaining and starting a family.

Similarly, this study represents a vast composite of gay and lesbian headed families. Much like all research focused on family, this project represents families created, formed, and communicated through a variety of means including adoption, artificial insemination, divorce, surrogacy, and foster parenting. While this can be represented in as a benefit to understanding the universal themes represented through a wide variety and a diverse population of gay and lesbian headed families, future studies may be warranted in narrowing the focus to understand how, if at all, family function and origin affect the narratives and topics communicated during gay and lesbian parent-child sex communication.

Beyond providing limitations of the study, it is important to note the potential for future research. Suggestions for future inquiry have been provided throughout this study. I provide additional suggestions for inquiry in parent-child sex communication and gay and lesbian family communication. First, future investigations would benefit from inquiring on how families were formed affect, if at all, the discussion of sex and

sexuality. For example, many participants within this current study started a family through a previous heterosexual marriage or relationship, coming out as homosexual to their families and children later in life. Depending on the child's age at the time their parents came out as homosexual or began engaging on homosexual behavior, this may have influenced the ways in which their parents discussed sexual orientation, reproduction, or sexual behavior with their children. Additionally, further attention into the specific dynamics of family composition may be warranted in understanding how PCSC is structured and who is included within it. Specifically some participants described having previous spouses, biological parents, sperm donors, or surrogates present and active within their child's life. The presence of additional significant members of family within a child's life may result in conflicting, supportive, or additional messages regarding sex and sexuality.

Second, future research can benefit from investigating how transgender parents negotiate and navigate parent-child sex communication. Because transgender individuals, along with their families, often experience a unique transition in roles, rules and expectations (Hines, 2006), communication of trans individuals and their families represent unique and specific experiences that should not be lumped together with gay and lesbian individuals. The re-negotiation of roles and behaviors of family members may influence how, when, and what parents talk about with their children regarding sex and sex education. By providing transgender parents with specific study in which to discuss and disclose their experiences, research can highlight the unique experiences trans individuals and their families experience in terms of sex communication. Similarly bisexual individuals were purposefully not included within this study, but warrant future

investigation to understand how, if at all, bisexual parent PCSC is different from heterosexual or homosexual PCSC.

Finally, during my interviews with participants, many people discussed situations where they purposefully sought out individuals outside of their familial ties to discuss sex and sexuality with their children. Specifically, parents sought someone of a specific sex or sexual orientation, often opposite of theirs, to speak with their children. Future investigation would benefit from understanding what motivating factors affect a parent's desire to seek out a trusted individual outside of their family to speak to their children about sex and sexuality. Additionally, researchers can investigate how gay and lesbian parents choose those individuals as well as navigate with them what appropriate topics, frequency, and depth of discussion are when conversing with their children. Filling this gap in knowledge may highlight a unique experience previously understudied in how children and parents discuss and understand sex and sexuality through the use of an outside resource. Qualitative analysis of what these conversations look like may provide needed depth in a specific but integral portion of gay and lesbian parent's PCSC with their children.

Overall, while researchers are making great strides in understanding the lived experiences of gay and lesbian families, more research is needed to understand how this specific family composition discusses and enacts PCSC. As more and more gay and lesbian individuals and couples begin forming families, research needs to continue to analyze how sex and sexuality is being communicated within these families. My present study adds to the extant literature on PCSC as a whole, as well as our comprehension of gay and lesbian headed families. It is critical that we integrate a variety of populations,

specifically gay and lesbian parents and their children when investigating sex

communication in order to understand the entire spectrum of sex communication, rather

than a small portion of it.

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Appendix A: Facebook Recruitment Script

Hello! My name is Allison Bonander and I'm a doctoral candidate at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. My research focuses on family communication and parent-child communication about sex education. Specifically this dissertation study aims to understand how gay and lesbian parents navigate communicating to their children about sex and sexuality. I believe that sex education conversations between parents and children are incredibly important and deserving of our attention. I need your help in researching this particular communication experience.

In order to qualify for this study you must:
1) Self identify as gay or lesbian
2) Have at least one child (of any age)
3) Have talked to that child about sexual orientation, sex education, or reproduction to *any degree*. (Note: you only need to have participated in at least one of these conversations, not all)
4) Be willing to participate in an in-person or phone interview

If you choose to participate all of your information will be kept absolutely confidential.

If you are willing to participate in this study, or have further questions about this specific research, please contact me at AllisonBonander@Gmail.com.

Thank you in advance for your participation and sharing this call with your personal networks. Your insight is truly appreciated!

Primary Researcher	Secondary Researcher
Allison Ronnau Bonander	Dr. Jordan Soliz
Department of Communication Studies	Department of Communication Studies
University of Nebraska-Lincoln	University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Lincoln, NE, 68506-0329	Lincoln, NE, 68506-0329
Phone: (402) 690-8152	Phone: (402) 472-8326
Email: AllisonBonander@gmail.com	Email: JSoliz2@unl.edu

Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Flyer

Hello! My name is Allison Bonander and I'm a doctoral candidate at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. My research focuses on family communication and parent-child communication about sex education. Specifically this dissertation study aims to understand how gay and lesbian parents navigate communicating to their children about sex and sexuality. I believe that sex education conversations between parents and children are incredibly important and deserving of our attention. I need your help in researching this particular communication experience.

In order to qualify for this study you must:
1) Self identify as gay or lesbian
2) Have at least one child (of any age)
3) Have talked to that child about sexual orientation, sex education, or reproduction to *any degree*. (Note: you only need to have participated in at least one of these conversations, not all)
4) Be willing to participate in an in-person or phone interview

If you choose to participate all of your information will be kept absolutely confidential.

If you are willing to participate in this study, or have further questions about this specific research, please contact me at AllisonBonander@Gmail.com.

Thank you in advance for your participation and sharing this call with your personal networks. Your insight is truly appreciated!

Primary Researcher
Allison Ronnau Bonander
Department of Communication Studies
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Lincoln, NE, 68506-0329
Phone: (402) 690-8152
Email: AllisonBonander@gmail.com

Secondary Researcher
Dr. Jordan Soliz
Department of Communication Studies
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Lincoln, NE, 68506-0329
Phone: (402) 472-8326
Email: JSoliz2@unl.edu

Appendix C: Informed Consent

Informed Consent: FAMILY COMMUNICATION ABOUT SEX: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF GAY AND LESBIAN PARENT'S PARENT-CHILD SEX COMMUNICATION

The present study is designed to examine lesbian and gay parents and their communication with their children regarding sex education. The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision on whether or not to participate in this study.

To participate in this study you must meet the following criteria:

(1) You must be at least 19 years old,
(2) You must identify as lesbian or gay
(3) You must have at least one child and had a conversation with that child regarding sex education, reproduction, or sexual orientation. (Note: you do not need to have participated in all of these topics to participate in this study).

If you do not meet the above criteria, you do not qualify for this particular study and should not proceed. If you do meet the participation criteria, you may take part in this study by providing your consent on the bottom of this page and then participating in a personal interview, which will ask you questions about communication in your family regarding sex communication, as well as some demographic information. Participation will take approximately 60 minutes.

All of your responses will be kept completely confidential, and you will have the option to remain anonymous. The only individuals with access to your responses will be the researchers in this study. Results will be used for data in a research presentation at an academic conference and possible publication in a refereed academic journal, but will not personally identify you in any way.

You should also know that at any time throughout the interview you may decide not to answer any of the questions. You are also free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with the investigators or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. There are no direct benefits to you as a result of participating in this study except potentially gaining a greater understanding of the experiences of gay and lesbian parents and their communication with their children regarding sex communication. In the event that you would like to seek professional guidance to discuss family or parenting issues, please contact a local counseling service in your area. It is the responsibility of each participant to pay for treatment if they choose to seek it, and researchers will not be held liable for treatment expenses incurred.

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate or after the study is complete. If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact the principal investigator at (402)

690-8152 or via email at AllisonBonander@gmail.com. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigator or would like to report any concerns about the study, you may contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board at (402) 472-6965. If you meet the criteria and choose to continue participation, you must read this entire informed consent form and verify that you agree to participate and fulfill the participant criteria by electronically signing the form. Please feel free to print this page for your records. If you would like a copy of this form, please contact the principal investigator at (402) 690-8152.

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this study. By checking the box below, you are certifying that you meet the criteria specified above, and that you have decided to participate and have read and understood the information presented. You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with the investigators or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln I meet the criteria specified above, I have decided to participate, and I have read and understood the information presented. I realize that I am free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting my relationship with the investigators or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Should you have any questions regarding your participation in this study, please feel free to contact:

Primary Researcher	Secondary Researcher
Allison Ronnau Bonander	Dr. Jordan Soliz
Department of Communication Studies	Department of Communication Studies
University of Nebraska-Lincoln	University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Lincoln, NE, 68506-0329	Lincoln, NE, 68506-0329
Phone: (402) 690-8152	Phone: (402) 472-8326
Email: AllisonBonander@gmail.com	Email: JSoliz2@unl.edu

_____   _____

(Name – Please Print)   Date

_____

(Signature)

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

**FAMILY COMMUNICATION ABOUT SEX:
A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF GAY AND LESBIAN PARENT'S
PARENT-CHILD SEX COMMUNICATION**

Pre-interview ethics statement

Hello. My name is Allison Bonander. I'm a doctoral candidate in Communication Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. I'm doing a study to learn more about the way children and their gay or lesbian parents participate in sexual communication. This study will be done in two parts. In the first part, I will ask you to answer some general questions about you and your LGBT child, such as age and ethnicity, to better understand who is in your family. In the second part, I will ask you some open-ended questions. There are absolutely no right or wrong answers, descriptions of your personal experience. The entire process will take approximately one hour.

Before we begin, there are a few things I would like to go over:
- Are you 19 years or older?
- Do you identify as gay or lesbian?
- Have you had any conversation with your child about sex education, sexual orientation, or reproduction?

I also want to take you through the informed consent form and procedures for the study so you clearly understand your rights today. **[Give both copies of consent form to participant, give participant time to read and sign both forms, collect one form from participant]**

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Part I: Information about you and your child

Participant ID_____

Information about you
1. Age _____
2. Sex: Male   Female
3. Sexual Orientation: Gay   Lesbian   Other_____
4. Your Ethnic Background (circle all that apply):
    Asian American
    Black/African American
    Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
    Hispanic/Latino
    Native American

White/Caucasian

Other(s) _____

5. What is your religious affiliation, if any?

6. What is your relationship status?
    Married   (marriage date)
    Separated or Divorced (date)
    Widowed (date)
    Cohabiting with a partner (date relationship started)
    Dating someone seriously (date relationship started)
    Single

7. Your highest education attained:

8. Information about the children in your family (indicate which child you'll be discussing in the interview—if you have more than one child, choose one to discuss in the interview).

Number	Sex: M or F	Current Age	Biological? Y or N	Stepchild? Y or N	Adopted? Y or N
Child One					
Child Two					
Child Three					
Child Four					
Child Five					
Child Six					

Information about your child
9. Your child's ethnic background (circle all that apply):
    Asian American
    Black/African American
    Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
    Hispanic/Latino
    Native American
    White/Caucasian
    Other(s) _____

10. How does your child define their sexual orientation?

Now that we have the "housekeeping" items taken care of, we can begin our interview. What I'm interested in is your experience as a parent after your child came out and you discussed this with them.

Everyone's experience is different, so I want to stress that there aren't any right or wrong answers here. Whenever you can give me stories and examples to clarify a point that you are making that will be very helpful. Do you have any questions so far?

- Tell me about your family.
    - o How did you and your partner meet?
    - o When did you start a family with children?
    - o How would you describe your relationship with your children?
- **RQ1:**
    - o I am curious in understanding how same-sex parents define and participate in sex communication with their children. Can you describe how you personally define sex communication?
    - o What do you think is important to include or exclude in sex communication with your children?
    - o Are there any topics that are off limits / that you do not include on purpose or because they may be too difficult to bring up?
    - o In your specific family, who brought up the topic of sex communication?
    - o Where did this happen? How old were your children?
- **RQ2:**
    - o Tell me about the first time sex communication came up in your family.
    - o What questions or topics were asked by your child/children? What did you ask?
    - o How has this conversation evolved as your children have grown up?
    - o Are there topics that are avoided by you or your children or you?
- **RQ3:**
    - o Can you describe how sexual orientation has been, or has not been, a part of your sex conversations with your children?
    - o How has sexual orientation come up when explaining reproduction/birth control/etc.?
    - o Who brings up these conversations? How frequently do they occur?
- **RQ4:**
    - o How, if at all, do/did you and your partner discuss how you would talk to your children about sexual communication?
    - o What topics did you discuss with each other?
    - o How did you agree who would discuss them and when?
    - o Did you participate in these conversations together or individually? How did you decide that?
    - o Are there any surprises that you and your partner did not prepare for?
    - o Did you and your partner agree on how to handle these conversations?
    - o When, if ever, did you disagree? What topics?

- Overall, how would you describe the success of your personal parent child sex communication?
- What, if anything, would you have done differently? What worked well? Why?

- If you could give any advise to gay or lesbian parents trying to talk to their children about sex and sexuality, what would you tell them?
- Is there anything else you think I should know about this topic?

Thank you for participating in this study. Your time and information is so valuable to me. If you have any questions please feel free to ask me at this time.