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Scaffolding in Family Relationships: A Grounded Theory of Coming Out to Family

Objective: *To challenge the conceptualization that disclosure means* coming out *by creating a model of coming out inclusive of various lived experiences.*
Background: *Coming out has traditionally been conceptualized in Western literature as disclosing one's sexual minority identity to self and others. However, this conceptualization may not generalize to a collectivistic culture such as Taiwan.*
Method: *Two waves of interview data with 28 Taiwanese lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals were used to establish a grounded theory of coming out to family.*
Results: *This grounded theory's core category is scaffolding for a stable family relationship, in which coming out is a scaffolding process. Three key propositions in this emergent theory are (a) LGB individuals and their parents have different sets of expectations for personal and family life that need to be reconciled, (b) scaffolding efforts create an iterative process in that they could either facilitate or inhibit reconciliation, and (c) the iterative process of scaffolding is influenced by a host of factors.*
Conclusion: *This study established a grounded theory of coming out for Taiwanese LGB individuals and their families in which disclosures are often absent and scaffolding to reach goals is key.*
Implications: *Cultural background and the prolonged iterative process of coming out should be considered when theorizing about and providing relevant professional services to this population.*

Despite recent legal progress and a more tolerant society, *coming out*—that is, the process of revealing one's sexual orientation—as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) to family remains difficult (Cramer & Roach, 1988; Denes & Afifi, 2014; Grafsky, Hickey, Ngyuen, & Wall, 2018; Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Savin-Williams, 2001; Willoughby & Doty, 2010). In fact, there is a well-developed literature that examines the difficulty and complexity of coming out to family. Coming-out studies have focused on predictors of disclosure of one's sexual orientation (Bih, 2003; Heatherington & Lavner; 2008; Waldner & Magruder, 1999); initial parental reactions to disclosure (Cramer & Roach, 1988; LaSala, 2000; Merighi & Grimes, 2000; Robinson, Walters, & Skeen, 1989; Rossi, 2010; Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998; Scherrer, Kazyak, & Schmitz, 2015); and psychological, interpersonal, social, and health implications of disclosure (D'Amico, Julien, Tremblay, & Chartrand, 2015; Meyer, 2003; Needham & Austin, 2010).

Underlying this literature are various conceptualizations of coming out, such as acknowledging one's sexual orientation to oneself (Baptist & Allen, 2008; Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Davies, 1992) or disclosing to others (Ben-Ari, 1995; Grafsky et al., 2018; Harry, 1993; Jordan & Deluty, 1998; Legate, Ryan, & Weinstein, 2012; Merighi & Grimes; 2000; Rossi, 2010; Valentine, Skelton, & Butler,

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2003). As such research proliferated, conceptualizations are often conflicting and now sometimes include a focus on the multidimensionality of coming out. Researchers attempted to probe deeper into the applicability and implications of the extant conceptualizations, such as Harry's (1993) attempt to differentiate "being out" from "coming out," Ben-Ari's (1995) thinking of coming out as a dialectic between intimacy and privacy, Morris's (1997) perspective of coming out as a multidimensional process subject to external factors, Orne (2011)'s rethinking of coming out as "'strategic outness'—the continual contextual management of sexual identity" (p. 682), and Denes and Afifi's (2014) legitimization of the "coming out again" (p. 1) phenomenon.

Although coming out has been critically examined and empirically expanded in past decades, several important aspects of coming out need further investigation. Most importantly, the majority of the coming-out literature relies primarily on White gay men and lesbians living in Westernized cultural contexts (e.g., Goodrich, 2009; Phillips & Ancis, 2008). This is despite some nascent empirical evidence that suggests (a) coming out varies for those who self-identify as bisexual and (b) perspectives on and acceptance of "nonnormative" sexualities across cultures create differential coming-out experiences. Using a culturally underrepresented sample, Taiwanese LGB adults, the aim of this study was to further delineate coming out and its implications by filling a few gaps in current coming-out literature. Two main gaps that this study was designed to fill are understanding coming-out processes when (a) explicit disclosures are absent in the process of coming out to family and (b) when disclosures to or discoveries by family members do not result in *being out* among family members. In the first scenario, LGB children may forego explicit disclosure attempts to family members in favor of deploying covert moves to make their sexuality known or a family member may inadvertently discover a child's sexual orientation, in either case instigating the negotiation of coming out. In the second scenario, an explicit disclosure or accidental discovery occurs but is followed by prolonged pretense feigning that nothing is known or changed with regard to a child's presumed heterosexuality. Studying these underinvestigated, yet not uncommon, scenarios would strengthen our understanding of the coming-out experience for LGB individuals and their families by expanding the range of empirical inquiry and theoretical understanding of the coming-out experience within the families of LGB individuals. These also are in line with calls to queer the field's methodologies, including those that help examine within-group variations and intersectionality (Fish & Russell, 2018).

Dissecting the Extant Literature on Coming Out

Homosexual Identity Development Stage Models

Early theories of coming out focused on the psychological intrapersonal processes of self-identification as homosexual (Dank, 1971; Gagnon & Simon, 1968). In 1979, Cass's seminal work proposed a six-stage identity model: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis (for a review, see Manning, 2016). Similar models include Coleman's (1982) five-stage model, McDonald's (1982) nine-stage model, and Troiden's (1989) four-stage model. Albeit intuitive, stage models have received a fair amount of criticism for two reasons. First, stage models imply that identity development is linear, which contradicts researchers who have argued that identity development is often iterative and that personal variations—age, socioeconomic status, family formation, involvement within the LGB community, among others—result in dissimilar identity development processes (Baptist & Allen, 2008; Ben-Ari, 1995; Davies, 1992; Harry, 1993; Manning, 2016). Second, early identity development stage models overly rely on gay men's experiences and consequently overlooked within-group variation in the queer community. For instance, on the basis of findings that women have more fluid and flexible experiences than men in exploring sexuality, Sophie (1986) and Morris (1997) both argued that lesbians' identity development process is multidimensional and sensitive to sociocultural and historical contexts in different ways than those described in models based on gay men's experiences.

Disclosure as the Core of Coming Out

Following the emergence of stage models, other research in the late 1980s started to examine

coming out from an interpersonal perspective, which posited that in addition to LGB individuals coming to term with oneself, they also need to let others know their sexuality to live a more *authentic* life (Orne, 2011). In fact, the terms *coming out* and *disclosure* are sometimes used interchangeably (Legate et al., 2012; Valentine et al., 2003), and Heatherington and Lavner (2008) stated that "the act of disclosing their LGB identity to others ('coming out') represents a major psychological decision" (p. 330). Defining coming out *as* disclosure is useful and intuitive, yet limits how researchers ask questions and collect and analyze data. Several problems exist in this conceptualization, namely, the turning-point assumption and the overemphasis on agency.

The turning-point assumption. The turning-point assumption asserts that the life of the sexual minority and his or her family is going well until a discrete disclosure event takes place, at which time his or her life is thrown into turmoil and major changes follow. For example, Beeler and DiProva (1999) wrote that "disclosure to family has the potential to *dramatically affect* not only the gay or lesbian individual, but it also may profoundly affect family members as well" (p. 433), and Denes and Afifi (2014) explained that "the first coming out is undoubtedly an important *turning point* in many GLBQ individuals' lives" (p. 23). Picturing disclosure as a turning point results in a majority of research focusing on what happens immediately after disclosure. The turning-point assumption also constitutes an operationalization problem. A clear example is Ben-Ari's (1995) study of coming out in families, in which the author acknowledged that some parents were suspicious long before the disclosure event, and yet only families having gone through explicit disclosures were eligible to participate in the study. What happens before disclosure (if there is one) is largely marginalized or relegated as anecdotal or as preparation for disclosure. When disclosure is viewed as the turning point, coming-out processes that lack explicit disclosures go unrecognized or the turning point of focus disguises or distracts from the longer term coming-out process.

The turning-point assumption also encourages a static, binary conceptualization of coming out (Fish & Russell, 2018): A person is either out or closeted, as demarcated by whether an explicit disclosure even has occurred. That is, before LGB individuals disclose, the information is presumed to be unknown to others, and the individual is closeted; once disclosure occurs, the individual is out (of the proverbial closet). Dziengel's (2015) be/coming-out model challenges binary models of disclosure by arguing that "coming out as a term does not accurately capture the ongoing stress of *being out* and, for most people, the reality of repeatedly making choices regarding disclosing their sexual identity throughout their life span" (p. 306). Similarly, Denes and Afifi (2014) effectively deconstructed the turning-point assumption by discussing the "coming-out again" phenomenon, in which a person who previously has disclosed a sexual minority status feels the need to disclose again. This defies assumptions that disclosure makes a person out, and that those who are out remain out. A quarter of the participants in Denes and Afifi's study came out a second time to clarify identity, establish identity permanence, and increase acceptance or acknowledgment.

Overemphasis on the agency of the LGB individuals. The second problem of conceptualizing coming out as disclosure is the emphasis on individual agency with regard to the timing of a deliberate declarative statement about one's sexuality. Certainly, many sexual minorities exert their agency in planning and delivering a disclosure, but this conceptualization marginalizes the agency of others in the coming-out process, such as the agency of parents, other means of coming out, and other situational and relational factors (Orne, 2011). For example, parents could be suspicious and thus go through the child's Internet browsing history or could directly confront the child. The child might react by denying, fabricating stories, or admitting to the parents' suspicion. In these cases, the parents' agency, instead of the child's agency, instigate the coming-out process.

Further, the intuitive appeal of coming out as disclosure implies that the agency of LGB individuals is always present. Recognizing the multiple agencies in the process of coming and being out opens reveals the nuanced, multilayered, and relational nature of these processes. Nordqvist and Smart (2014) documented "sweeping things under the carpet" and "tacit agreements not to mention their sexuality" in sexual minorities' family interactions (pp. 20–21). Similarly, Brown (1989) documented the *I know you know*

strategy, and Ponse (1976) called similar dynamics "counterfeit secrecy" (p. 323), a phenomenon also reported by others (i.e., Bih, 2003; Brown, 1989; Tsai, 2015; Warren, 1974; Weston, 1991; Zhuang, Chen, & Liu, 2011). Parental suspicion was reported in LaSala's (2000) book examining young adults' coming out in one's family of origin. Hom (1994) formalized inadvertent discoveries made by unaware parents as one type of coming out reported to be more common than sexual minority children's agentive coming out, whereas denial has been reported in several studies (e.g., Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998). Taken together, it is clear that coming out to family could take various forms, with complicated factors underlying the process; the present study was designed to build a coming-out model that is inclusive of these complicated dynamics.

Coming Out in Taiwanese Cultures

Another critique of the extant coming-out literature is the lack of cultural diversity. The meanings and implication of coming out could vary drastically among different cultures. Individualistic cultures that make agentic disclosure possible or preferred in Western countries may be infeasible in more collectivist cultures, such as that of Taiwan. As Erni and Spires (2001) cautioned, the stigmatization of Taiwanese sexual minorities is not "religion-based, class-inflected or medically pathologized" (p. 41) as in the United States, but "queers in Taiwan are marginalized through their fundamental deviation from the (heteronormative) traditional family-centered social order deeply informed by Confucianism" (p. 41). For Taiwanese or other East and South Asian countries, histories of colonization and oppression may inform the ways sexual minorities and their families make meaning of sexuality. Tsai's (2015) study of Taiwanese sexual minority children found that they needed to come out repeatedly (more than twice) to their parents, and Bih's (2003) study documented how disclosure resulted in no behavioral changes in family dynamics because the family members pretended no disclosure ever happened. Similar family dynamics were found in the first wave of data collection for this project, which is a larger study on how Taiwanese sexual minorities negotiated the closeted status with family while maintaining family relationships (see Jhang, 2014). Interestingly, inclusion criteria explicitly required that participants be sexual minorities who had not come out (*chu-gui*, meaning "exit closet" in Mandarin Chinese) to at least one family member, but the interviews revealed that a majority of participants had either orally disclosed or their families had inadvertently discovered and explicitly discussed their sexual orientation with them. Nonetheless, these participants did not classify themselves as having come out because their disclosure or the discovery was disregarded by family members.

Research Question

The aforementioned studies manifested nuances in coming out: LGB children may or may not exert the agency to disclose, parents may or may not exert the agency to inquire or discover, sexual minority status could be kept as an open secret or ignored by denial, and multiple disclosures may be needed before being out occurs. These paradoxes present an opportunity to expand coming-out research to a culturally underrepresented sample (Goodrich, 2009; Phillips & Ancis, 2008). Therefore, the present study was designed to answer the question: What is the process of being out in one's family among Taiwanese sexual minorities?

Method

Grounded theory (GT) methods (Charmaz, 1995) guided the data collection and analysis. GT provides a set of inductive data collection and analytic procedures aimed at building theories of patterned relationships and psychosocial processes. It has the distinguishing characteristics of simultaneous data collection and analysis, data-driven analytic codes (as opposed to codes from preconceived hypotheses), emerging middle-range theories during data collection and analysis, and theoretical sampling, where sampling aims at theory construction rather than the representativeness of a certain population. Charmaz's GT approach is built on a constructivist view; the research process is created through "researchers' theoretical and disciplinary lenses as well as the interactional products of the researchers and participants" (p. 30). The present study was designed to comprehend how coming out is understood and practiced by Taiwanese sexual minorities, independent of well-established coming-out studies based in Western cultures; thus, a GT is appropriate.

Sample

This study used interviews conducted in February and March 2014 as part of a larger study on closeted LGB individuals' family interactions (see Jhang, 2014). The larger study was designed to understand the reasons LGB individuals remain closeted within their family and how they negotiate their closeted status while maintaining family relationships. Participants were recruited through an advertisement (in Mandarin) published on the website of Taiwan's biggest LGB organization (Taiwan TongZhi Hotline Association), through personal contacts, and by snowball sampling. The association has served the LGB community in Taiwan for more than 2 decades and is a hub for information dissemination within this community. Personal contact and snowball sampling were used to increase the number of participants and to enhance diversity of the sample, with each participant reaching out to his or her acquaintances of different sexual orientations to be included in the study. Interested persons contacted the author via e-mail and completed a screening survey to confirm eligibility. Specifically, inclusion criteria required that participants be LGB, with at least one parent unaware of their sexual orientation.

Participants included in the present study were 28 Taiwanese LGB (21 gay or lesbian and 7 bisexual) individuals ranging in age from 22 to 38 years ($M = 29.5$, $SD = 3.0$); 15 were female, 12 were male, and one identified as neither. At the time of the interview, 21 resided in Taiwan and 7 lived overseas (United States, Australia, and United Kingdom). None were married or in a legal union; 18 were in a committed relationship, and 10 were single.

Data Collection

The participants took part in a 1-hour semistructured telephone interview in Mandarin Chinese (the native language of the researcher and all participants). Interviews were conducted via telephone due to geographic distance. The interview guides included open-ended prompts such as "Tell me about your family relationship," "How do you maintain the closeted status?" and "How do you handle sensitive topics with your family that may expose your sexual orientation?" Early interviews included six participants, and preliminary findings were used to refine and expand the interview questions (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The main questions were the same in both rounds, but a small number of probing questions were added for the second round (e.g., "Do you think your family dynamics have changed since the first time we spoke?"). Using the refined interview guide, 22 more interviews were conducted. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim in Mandarin Chinese. Only the quotations used in this report were translated to English.

Analysis

All data were analyzed for this study after data collection had been completed. The data analysis started with open coding, in which all interview transcripts were printed and read thoroughly line by line (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2011). During the open-coding stage, categories such as "maintaining normal family dynamics," "negotiating sibling relationship," and "speculating family's knowledge of their sexual orientation" were established, each with several subcategories, such as when siblings are mentioned as a positive or negative force for maintaining a closeted status. Next, in the axial-coding stage, categories established from the opening-coding stage were examined to see whether and how they related to one another. For example, "positive sibling" is related to "family's knowledge of sexual orientation" in that siblings helped keep the secret or diverted parents' attention. In this stage, patterns and overarching concepts among the relationships of categories were established. Finally, in the selective-coding stage, a core category was established, which was then systematically related to the other (sub)categories. In this stage, all the relationships created (such as "positive sibling relationship" leads to "maintaining family's level of knowledge of sexual orientation") were considered. The core category is the uppermost level of code that subsumes and connects to all other codes. By actively searching for similar and deviant cases, the detected patterns and relationships were checked against the data.

An extensive audit trail (Rodgers & Cowles, 1993) was maintained throughout the research process. This tool establishes trustworthiness by collecting various documents, including contextual or field notes, analytical and methodological thoughts and decisions, and self-reflective memos to check

the researcher's own assumptions and biases. To warrant credibility and usefulness (Charmaz, 2000), the codebook was taken to an advanced 4-month-long graduate seminar on qualitative data analysis for discussion. During the weekly seminar, the conceptualizations and insights were discussed and made more nuanced, and several editions of the coding and core category resulted. The graduate seminar discussions arrived at the integrated findings presented in the next section. Moreover, a native Mandarin Chinese speaker who studied social sciences served as an independent coder to conduct an audit of the coding and codebook previously established via the described procedures. Quotes were translated from Mandarin to English, and then back-translated from English to Mandarin by the auditor (Creswell, 1998). Both versions of the quotes were then compared to check for major semantic discrepancies. When found, the auditor and I discussed them until a resolution was achieved.

Results

The three stages of GT analysis arrived at the core category: *scaffolding for a stable family relationship*, with three premises (see Figure 1). First, LGB individuals and their parents have different sets of expectations for personal and family life (e.g., parents wanting a grandchild related by blood vs. sexual minorities wanting to adopt a child) that correspond with larger historical, social, cultural, and political expectations, such as heteronormativity for the parents. Heteronormativity is an ideology that upholds ideas such as gender conventionality, heterosexuality, and family traditionalism (Ingraham, 1994), and marginalizes people who challenge those institutionalized perspectives (Adam, 1998) and individualism for the children. Various scaffolding efforts were made by both parents and the children to reconcile these discrepancies and achieve a stable family relationship, which occurred when neither see the LGB child's sexuality as a source of trouble, and other aspects of life could therefore move on without worry or conflict about the child's sexuality. Second, the scaffolding efforts entailed explicit disclosure or implicit information sharing that might or might not serve the purpose of reconciliation but in either case resulted in an iterative process in which a disclosure attempt might decrease or enlarge the expectation discrepancy. Disclosing one's sexual orientation or having it discovered only constituted incidents in the iterative process rather than a goal or outcome. Third, the iterative process of scaffolding was influenced by various factors, such as romantic relationships and family burdens, and each factor influenced the process taken to reach the goal of reconciled expectations.

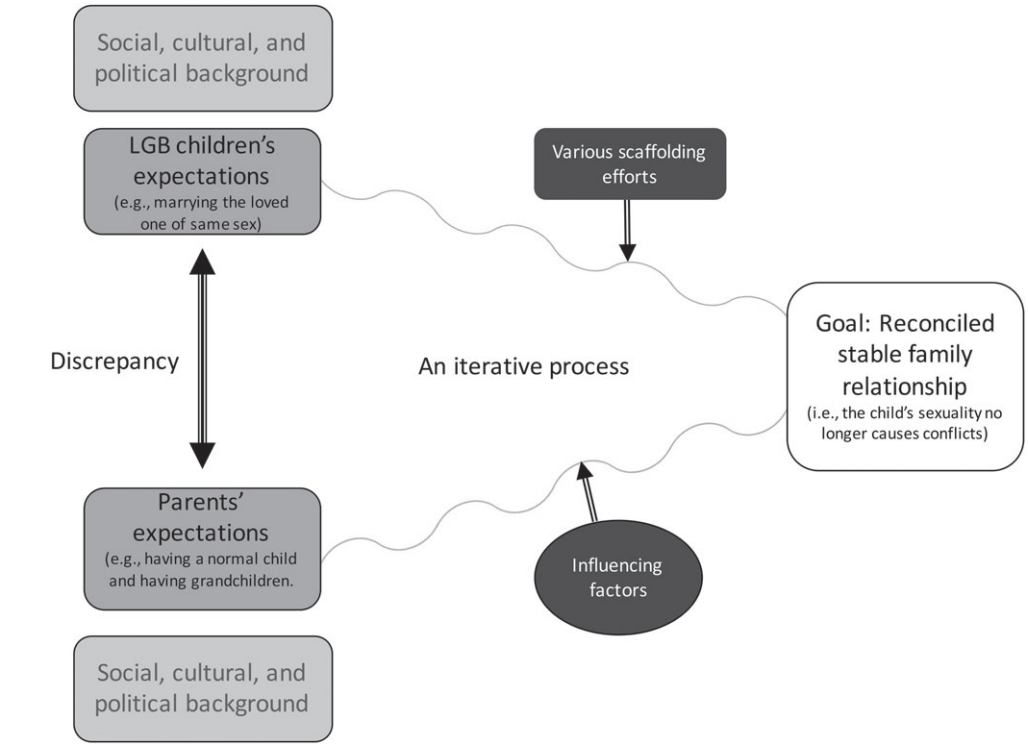
Discrepant Expectations

Both LGB individuals and their parents had their own sets of expectations for the individual's life. The two sets of expectations might have moved closer or further apart over time, and either side could revise and compromise its set of expectations, but the coming-out process would only be complete once both sets of expectations were reconciled. Therefore, it was not the act of disclosure but rather the status of reconciliation that denoted coming out. Reconciliation was reached when the child's sexual orientation was no longer a source of conflict. Parents usually had the heteronormative expectation that their children would marry and have offspring, whereas the sexual-minority child expected to be free to live life as a sexual minority, and this might entail remaining single or childless. (Notably, in the places most of these respondents resided same-sex marriage was not legal, and assisted reproductive technology was only permitted for legally married couples when these interviews were conducted.) The elements that comprised the expectations of parents and their LGB children's sets of expectations are delineated in what follows.

Parents' expectations. Participants recognized the power of heteronormativity, which means heterosexuality is everyone's assumed sexual orientation unless there is reason to believe otherwise. Having a child in the category of "otherwise" signals mistakes and failures of the parent. The participants made attributions about the origins of their parents' perceived expectations and hopes with regard to the children, including heteronormative culture, traditional philosophy, and political background, as well as the symbolic value of rituals.

The most salient theme in parents' perceived expectations was *being normal*. Participants stated that in Taiwan, most parents expect their child to follow the ordinary life cycle—to be married, have a stable job, have children, buy

FIGURE 1. COMING OUT IN FAMILY AS SCAFFOLDING. THIS FIGURE SHOWS THE DISCREPANT SETS OF PARENTS' AND LESBIAN, GAY, OR BISEXUAL CHILDREN'S EXPECTATIONS ON THE LEFT, MARKING THE ONSET OF THE PROCESS, AND THE GOAL OF STABLE FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS ON THE RIGHT. THE EXPECTATIONS ARE INFLUENCED BY SOCIAL, CULTURAL, AND POLITICAL BACKGROUNDS. THE WAVY LINES DENOTE HOW VARIOUS SCAFFOLDING EFFORTS (SUCH AS CHILDREN HINTING TO PARENTS THAT THEY ARE GAY, LESBIAN, OR BISEXUAL) MAKE THE PROCESS ITERATIVE AND SYMBOLIZE THE UNEVEN DEGREE OF RECONCILIATION OVER TIME. THE ITERATIVE PROCESS IS AFFECTED BY VARIOUS FACTORS, SUCH AS SELF-IDENTITY STRENGTH AND FAMILY FINANCIAL CRISIS.



a house, grow old, and die peacefully—as encapsulated by the following quote:

> My mom would say just be normal, be like everyone else. She says she doesn't understand why young people want to be so different and so cool. She tells me it's a woman's job to find a good husband and have a couple of kids. She's not particularly against women having a job, but she thinks everyone gets married [and] has kids; for her, that's just the way it is.

The heteronormative script was deeply rooted in parents' perceived expectations, giving symbolic weight to the rituals around weddings and marriage. Parents were reported to believe that their success as parents—an important component of their self-identity, especially for mothers—was defined by their children's happiness, but they defined their children's happiness according to their own heteronormative scripts.

> Mom always says it's her responsibility as a mother to raise us right [so] that we all grow up to be good people and to be married and have children, and to be happy . . . that's her self-identity. . . . Lately, I realized the wedding is of great symbolic value to her . . . without it, nothing matters anymore. It's her big test to complete her identity as a mom. . . . When she gets emotional, she says she's a failed mother because I'm single still and she knows I'm probably not straight.

Other parents were said to relate their belief in being ordinary to the doctrine of the mean and the notion of yin and yang. The doctrine of the mean is an ancient Chinese philosophy of

harmony, but a lay understanding of it is to be the mean (i.e., statistically normal; in the mainstream) to achieve harmony. Yin and yang represent male and female, and achieving harmony is presumed to depend on combining the two. One participant recalled that her dad "would say something like 'Yin yang means a man and a woman getting married.'"

Another source of perceived parental expectations for children to be normal and ordinary was rooted in the government's harsh oppression of political dissidents from 1949 to 1987. Many participants' parents grew up in that era (known as White Terror), and some participants connected that experience to the parents' hopes that their children would be normal and ordinary to avoid drawing unnecessary attention to themselves. As one participant explained:

> They went through White Terror. Many parents are like that; they just want to mind their own business, asking their kids to mind their own business, blend in, be normal, because they are so scared of prosecution. My dad knows times have changed, but he doesn't believe the change is fundamental. We can't do anything to undo their fear.

LGB individuals' expectations. The elements of LGB children's expectations were different from those of their parents. They wanted good family relationships, but their definition of "good" varied. The core element of *good family relationships* across the variations was *stability*, which entailed a family life in which parents accepted or tolerated the circumstances enough that one could lead an honest life as a sexual minority while engaging in a stable romantic relationship. In essence, participants believed that if they could be their "true self," then a stable family life was possible. The yearning for stability in family relationships was particularly prominent among those whose family relationships were characterized by conflict. As one such participant explained:

> I want them to know me as a real person . . . to know that I am not that pathetic, lonely person they think I am. . . . I don't know if I want to make up my relationship with them—I'm not there yet—but for now I just want them to know me as I truly am.

Just as with parental expectations, expectations among LGB people varied, but on the whole expectations differed more markedly between parents and their LGB children. In an attempt to meet expectations, LGB individuals and their parents launched into the iterative process as a means to achieve reconciliation.

The Iterative Process of Scaffolding

To reconcile discrepant expectations and arrive at a stable family relationship in which sexual orientation was not a source of conflict, both the LGB individuals and their parents engaged in iterative scaffolding behaviors. The parents' expectations were challenged when their children's LGB identities were discovered or suspected, but they were portrayed as holding on to their expectations and wanting their LGB children to kowtow to those expectations as well. The LGB individuals did much the same, albeit with their own expectations; although they encountered varying degrees of resistance from their parents, they too held on to their expectations and wanted their parents to follow suit. Before reconciling the two sets of expectations, various attempts at persuasion occurred on both sides. Inevitably, however, the reconciliation process unfolded in any number of ways; there was no prescribed pathway to reconciliation. Rather, individual participants and their parents each had distinct ways of navigating their unique family context and dynamic. Further, what constituted reconciliation for one person may have been perceived as divergence for another. Several salient patterns and characteristics of the iterative process emerged from participants' narratives.

Boiling frogs. During scaffolding, "boiling frogs" was a salient theme. The aphorism states that if you put a frog in boiling water, then it will jump out immediately, but if you put it in cold water and slowly increase the heat, the frog will not notice the change in temperature until it is too late. Participants used this metaphor to explain one scaffolding strategy: By slowly and subtly exposing their parents to LGB-friendly ideas, slowly revealing information about their current romantic relationships, and taking other small steps, the LGB participants hoped to change their parents' expectations to match their own. As one participant narrated:

> My parents always kind of knew I have a girlfriend. . . . It was the first time my mom really saw my

> girlfriend; we invited many lesbian friends to have dinner with us. It's obvious they are all couples, and one couple even has a child. . . . By showing her how two women can build a happy and healthy family, I hope she will be more accepting. . . . It wasn't until all the friends left [that] mom asked who is the kid's father. We said the kid does not have a father. I think we pushed her to her limit, and she just went back to her room and cried.

Unspoken consensus. An important theme derived from the analysis was an unspoken consensus. By keeping the child's sexual orientation an open secret, both the parents and the LGB persons used scaffolding behaviors to subtly navigate reconciliation of their discrepant expectations. Parents often knew or suspected their child's sexual orientation, and the LGB individuals knew the parents knew, but by operating on an unspoken, tacit level, they both keep the family relationship in harmony. The open secret can be a result of LGB individuals' agentic disclosing acts or of parents' inadvertent discoveries. Suspicions may also result from a variety of situations such as nonconventional gender expression, staying single for too long, or the LGB person's "good friend" he or she always brings home. Whether known or suspected, the LGB person's sexual orientation often became a subject of unspoken consensus among family members.

Two phrases are salient in participants' narratives. In Mandarin Chinese, the idiom *xin-zhi-du-ming* (心知肚明) means "heart knows and belly understands," which means knowing but acting as if not knowing, and the pretense is kept up to maintain the status quo and avoid confrontation. Another term, *mo-qi* (默契), can be understood as an unspoken consensus, implied agreement, a tacit understanding, or unvoiced pact and was a salient theme in these LGB individuals' narratives. One lesbian participant, whose only other sibling (a younger brother) is gay, recalled her dad walking in on her brother sleeping with his boyfriend:

> Dad had the keys to [my and my brother's] apartment, and one day he walked in on my brother sleeping with his boyfriend. . . . At [dad's] birthday that year, he wrote a letter to us, saying that his birthday wish is that we won't be homosexual. . . . Everything is *xin-zhi-du-ming*; we just don't say it out loud.

Although the father specified that he did not want his children to be homosexual, the participant and her brother had never had any discussions pertaining to either their sexuality or this letter from their father.

Nearing-exposure incidents. The iterative process was marked by various nearing-exposure incidents, which varied across participants along two continuums: intentional versus inadvertent and planned versus unplanned. Nearing-exposure incidents challenged the unspoken consensus and produced a heightened state of tension, which sometimes led to (yet another) explicit discussion of the child's sexual orientation. Among the examples participants relayed were a relative seeing the LGB person holding hands with a same-sex person on the street and asking the parents about it and an exceedingly high phone bill that prompted the parents start asking questions. When such incidents occurred, both parents and LGB individuals engaged in a series of attempts to achieve their own expectations. Each of those attempts tended to change the dynamics of the discrepant expectations in one way or another, sometimes helping to narrow discrepancy gap and other times enlarging the gap, although maintaining the status quo (i.e., unspoken consensus) was also an outcomes experienced on some occasions.

Forced communication. Difficult conversations initiated by others can be described as forced communication. For participants, forced communication occurred when their parents initiated either a topic of conversation that heightened the risk of exposing their sexual orientation or an explicit discussion of the previously unspoken consensus. Topics of forced communication included parental inquiries about whether participants had a boyfriend or girlfriend, questioning who they are going out with, and even setting up dates for them. A lesbian participant recalled:

> I have always had very short hair; my mom more or less knows [I'm a lesbian]. . . . My mom is just acting like she doesn't know. . . . A while ago, she was pressing the topic of marriage, and I was on the edge of explosion, and I just yelled at her, "Don't we all have secrets we don't want to share? If I really tell you, would you really want to hear?" She went silent; all of a sudden, she lost her authority as a mom, and she just left. We haven't talked about [the yelling incident] since; we just pretend it didn't happen. It becomes another landmine for us. . . . Now I wish I had just said it out loud then.

This example shows how parent-initiated forced communication was reversed to place the mother on the spot (i.e., "Would you really want to hear it?"). Conversely, however, the question arises: Did the daughter really want to say it? The answers to these questions lie in the discrepancy of expectations. For the daughter, the expectation was to say it and to be accepted as a lesbian, but she understood saying it would not lead to acceptance; for the mother, the expectation was for the daughter to agree to the idea of marrying a man and to be the daughter she wanted her to be, but the mother also understood that would not happen as a result of this exchange. When the daughter threatened to come out explicitly, both were aware of the discrepancy and the danger of exposing the unspoken consensus. Neither expected to get what she wanted with an explicit discussion, although the daughter later regretted that she had not explicitly come out when the opportunity to do so presented itself. That said, later in the interview, she acknowledged that even if she had done so, her mother would "probably just pretend she didn't hear what I said."

Factors Influencing the Iterative Process

The process is iterative because many attempts to reconcile the discrepancy fail. Some worsen the situation by widening the discrepancy and inducing more conflicts that require subsequent reconciliation attempts, and the process is affected by factors detailed in the following sections as well. Specifically, those factors can be internal, such as the person's self-identity formation, personality, current academic or career success; they can also be external, such as other family members' interference and the family's financial situation.

Self-identity formation. Although anecdotal, older participants with a more stable self-identity seemed to be more likely to consider coming out, and younger participants experiencing more doubt and exploration seemed to be less likely to do so. That said, age played a relevant but not determinant factor; regardless of age, participants who were still forming their self-identity—which included some in their early 30s—reported fewer scaffolding attempts, and identity formation was considered a prerequisite to attempting reconciliation of discrepant expectations. As one participant explained:

> I didn't want to let them know because I wasn't even sure of myself. Wouldn't it be pointless to come out when I might not even be gay?. . . Now [that] I'm more sure of my sexual orientation, coming out has become an issue I need to really think about.

Stable romantic relationships. Being in a romantic relationship was a criterion for engaging in (another) attempt to disclose. Without a stable romantic relationship, coming out seemed pointless; in that case, as one participant said: "What's the point of going through all the potential turmoil when I don't even have someone to go through all this for?" Conversely, being in a stable romantic relationship served as a motivator to come out (again) given that participants felt there is a worthwhile goal and pressing reason to do so in that context.

Other family members. Participants primarily spoke of concern about coming out and reconciling expectations with their parents (vs. other family members; perhaps due to the focus of the interviews). Some only tried to reconcile their expectations with one parent (i.e., the target parent). Thus, *other family members* refers to family members in the core or extended family other than the target parent(s). These included siblings, the parent who is more accepting of the LGB person's sexual orientation (thus, not the target parent), and extended family members. The other family members could be grouped into three categories according to whether they were viewed as *allies*, *threats*, or *shields*.

Other family members as allies. Allies were formed when other family members were aware of the LGB person's sexual orientation and engaged in behavior helpful to the LGB person for reaching a reconciled expectation and stable family relationship. One participant stated:

> Mom is more accepting, but my dad, I will never let my dad know. He's already 80-something; I think he would have a heart attack if he found out. Mom is also worried [about dad's health], so even though we don't say it out loud, I know mom is helping me have a peaceful relationship with my dad, helping me conceal.

Other family members as shields. Shields were formed when other family members, usually

siblings, had problems that distracted or diverted parental attention from the participant's sexual orientation. For example, a participant talked about his older sister still being single in her mid-30s, which his parents considered to be beyond a marriageable age; thus, as long as she stayed single, he believed that the parents would not target him with relationship concerns. As that caveat suggests, however, shields were only temporary.

Other family members as threats. Threats were formed when other family members were either aware (intentional threats) or unaware (unintentional threats) of the LGB person's sexual orientation and engaged in behaviors that inhibited plans for reconciliation. For example, unaware aunts sometimes tried to set up blind dates, causing conflict when the LGB person declined. Intentional threats occurred when family members who were aware of the LGB person's sexual orientation used that knowledge to further their own self-interests. As one participant explained about her gay brother:

> He once tattled on me to our parents that my girlfriend was sleeping over that night at our other apartment, and my parents came over to the apartment the next morning just to catch us, but fortunately [my girlfriend] happened to have left before my parents came. . . . I think he did it because he wanted to make my parents think that he is on their side.

Timing. Other factors revolved around the concept of timing—factors that made it a particularly good or bad time to come out. Family stress was mentioned as a reason to delay (another) scaffolding effort; these participants were more willing to engage in other scaffolding efforts once the level of family stress had subsided. Examples of family stress included health or financial problems; the following quote depicts how a family member's health played a role:

> My grandmother was sick for a very long time, and she passed away earlier this year. Before [my grandmother] passed away, my mom spent all her time taking care of her. . . . We lived very close, and grandma lived alone, so every afternoon mom went to see grandma, and I went every week. . . . I thought mom had enough on her plate already.

The LGB person's career development was also mentioned often as a reason to delay or to engage in more scaffolding efforts: The likelihood of engaging in scaffolding endeavors seemed to be related to the stability of one's career development; those with less stable careers seemed to be less likely, and those with more stable careers seemed to be more likely to engage in scaffolding. Indeed, participants noted that efforts at career development—finishing school, getting a job, switching jobs, getting promotions, or getting a new degree—provided the most useful responses to inquiries about their romantic life (e.g., "I'm still trying to get a new job; a girlfriend will have to wait.").

Discussion

Using a Taiwanese sample, this study was designed to theorize the process of coming out. The GT analysis arrived at the core category, *scaffolding to a stable family relationship*, with the following premises: LGB individuals and their parents have their respective set of expectations for life and family relationships, and when the two sets of expectations are discrepant, both sides try to reconcile the discrepancy. For the participants, disclosure is not the goal; rather, it is scaffolding efforts to achieve the goal of reconciled expectations that lead to a stable family relationship. The LGB persons and their parents engage in scaffolding efforts that may help achieve, or pull them further away from, their goals, making the coming-out process iterative.

A multiple goals perspective (Goldsmith, 2004; Wilson, 2002) provides a useful lens to understand the iterative process. In everyday encounters, people attempt to maintain multiple goals pertaining to tasks, identity, and relationships, and each goal has varying degrees of complexity and salience (Grafsky et al., 2018; O'Keefe, 1988). For example, multiple goals must be considered when a closeted LGB person attempts to maintain the closeted status while declining an aunt's offer to arrange a blind date while in the presence of the mother, with whom an unspoken consensus exists. The LGB person needs to attend to the relational goal (not to offend the aunt) and the task goal (successfully decline the offer) while sending a message to the mother affirming his or her sexual minority identity (that it will not change). Successfully achieving these multiple goals in such an encounter may be important for the stability and health of family relationships, but the onerous and frequent nature of such encounters may

impel the LGB person to maintain emotional or geographic distance from the family. The proposed theory that emerged in the present study extends beyond the multiple goals theory by incorporating each communicative act where multiple goals are at play into a longitudinal process. Given that, in the context of ongoing family relationships, each of the multiple goals in any communicative act may or may not be achieved, previous success or failure of attending to certain goals add a layer of complexity to the next round of communicative scaffolding efforts. For example, continuing with the aunt and blind date example, if the task and identity goals were successfully achieved but the relational goal was not (e.g., the aunt was offended by the decline), then extra precaution would need to be taken moving forward not to compound the aunt's negative experience and risk either further deterioration of the relationship or being outed.

As the iterative process to reach reconciliation is launched, various forms of scaffolding—such as unspoken consensus, nearing-exposure incidents, and the act of boiling frogs—occurs in the context of family interaction. As previous studies have found (e.g., Nordqvist & Smart, 2014), LGB individuals and their families sometimes reach a tacit agreement to avoid topics about one's LGB status; indeed, unspoken consensus was found be one of the most salient scaffolding efforts. Rather than seeing it as a negative stage, or one that has to be passed to come out (e.g., LaSala, 2000), unspoken consensus was found to be potentially functional for building a stable family relationship, and explicit disclosure is not necessarily the next step. Operating under an unspoken consensus, there are many nearing-exposure incidents, such as forced communication, explicit and planned disclosures, planned questioning, impulsive disclosures, or inadvertent discoveries. These nearing-exposure events differ in their scaffolding effectiveness: Some help move toward reconciliation, and others make things worse.

The parents' process of coping with having a sexual-minority child could be understood with ambiguous loss theory (Boss, 1999), including boundary ambiguity perspectives (Catalpa & McGuire, 2018). Researchers have compared parents' experiences of learning that a child is a member of a sexual minority to death of a child, in that both require a grieving process (Beeler & DiProva, 1999). However, for the Taiwanese participants in the present study, disclosures and discussion were in some cases absent for years, resulting in a highly ambiguous coping process. When experiencing ambiguous loss, the expectations about role boundaries are unclear, so more scaffolding efforts may be needed to manage the ambiguity.

Finally, various factors influence the iterative process, including self-identity formation, being in a stable romantic relationship, timing-related external factors, and other family members. How other family members play a part in the iterative process could be examined with the communication privacy management theory (Petronio, 2002). If a sibling knows of the LGB person's sexual orientation, he or she may help keep the privacy boundary or may disturb the boundary by leaking information. In the iterative scaffolding process, privacy management is crucial in that it can have an impact on the family's ability to move toward the goal of maintaining stable family relationships. A romantic relationship also influences whether one feels motivated to make scaffolding efforts. Other external factors, such as a family's financial crisis, lead to the perception of good or bad timing for scaffolding attempts. Family members can serve inhibiting or facilitating functions in the scaffolding process by serving as allies to aid reconciliation, threats to reconciliation, or shields to buffer conflicts.

In short, this GT of coming out offers the following contributions. First, LBT individuals' sexual orientation is often a known secret in the family (Bih, 2003; Brown, 1989), and disclosure attempts (whether explicit and implicit) do not always change the known secret—parents may pretend the disclosure or discovery never happened. Second, the blurred line between knowing and not knowing leads to an iterative process of reconciling the discrepancy in expectations that can last for decades. Explicit disclosure is not a prerequisite to a reconciled expectation for some; rather, knowing when and how to slowly inch forward or back away in a tacit manner may help maintain stable family relationships. Third, the coming-out process is not always agentic: Parents' suspicions or discoveries can be beyond the LGB person's control, and external factors such as a romantic relationship, family financial situation, and other family members all play a role in the prolonged iterative process of coming out.

Practical Implications

The findings of this GT provide practical implications for scholars and practitioners. First, cultural background and family communicative norms should be taken into account when researching and theorizing about this population and when providing professional advice. Second, now that the prolonged and iterative process of coming out has been formally documented, research attention should turn to family interactions that exist long before any single disclosure attempts. Parents who are suspicious but never pursue confirmation have not been studied; rather, most research has focused on discrete disclosure events and subsequent interactions. Parents and sexual minorities in this stage, however, may need professional help as much as those who have gone through explicit discrete disclosures. Direct face-to-face conflict-prone interaction is not the norm for Taiwanese families, so those who disclose directly might have unusually high communication skills, disregard for family norms, or an especially tolerant family atmosphere.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite this study's contributions, it has limitations. First, the original aim of this study was to achieve a theoretically inclusive sample; yet some areas of inclusion were not met (i.e., there were no transgender and queer participants). Theoretical soundness is therefore limited. Using a secondary data approach prevented the implementation of some components of theoretical sampling called for by GT methods (Charmaz, 2000), such as recruiting participants in the process of theory-building to fit the theorizing needs. Further, the lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations each encounter unique life experiences, pressures, and hopes (Morris, 1997; Scherrer et al., 2015) beyond those shared by the collective, and they should therefore not be viewed as one homogeneous population. Therefore, future research should tease out within-group differences. Accordingly, application of the findings requires caution. Due to the recruitment location and research method employed, the sample in the study was a group of Taiwanese LGB young adults who are likely more educated and articulate about their experiences than LGB young adults who are not involved in the LGB rights movement. More diverse samples in terms of race, age, sexual orientation, and family types, among others, are needed. Finally, parental expectations are based on the narratives of participants (their children) and not parents themselves. Future research should include parents' perspectives. Finally, longitudinal data collection is needed to understand the scaffolding process more richly. Overall, this GT challenges the common conceptualization of coming out as disclosure and its associated assumptions and ideology; brings together scattered research findings; advances the LGB literature with an understudied sample; calls for rethinking coming out, and finally, formalizes scaffolding in family interaction, which has the potential to help researchers understand other family dynamics.

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