

Siblings in the « coming out » process²⁹

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If sibling studies are generally rare in the field of family research and therapy, in the study of LGBT families it has to be noted that they are virtually non-existent. However, the sibling sub-system represents an area of investigation that is extremely rich, and useful for clinical psychology. For this reason, qualitative research based on semi-structured interviews has been piloted during a preliminary phase (2011-2013) on a Belgian sample of 102 subjects (25 gays, 19 lesbians and 58 siblings). The research aimed to understand the impact of the coming-out process on the sibling relationship, as well as the role of the siblings during this process. In this study, siblings turned out to be a major potential resource in the coming out process of LGB persons, concerning in particular disclosure to parents and self-acceptance. Several factors seem to determine the way that it will be experienced amongst siblings, order of birth being the most salient.

Keywords: siblings, coming-out process, specific experience.

Introduction

The coming out process is the recognition, the acceptance and then the social sharing of a sexual orientation or gender identity. Several authors have described a staged gay identity developmental process that begins with an emerging awareness and proceeds to self-acceptance and disclosure to others (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989).

During this process, the family has a central place. The family has an undeniable impact on the individual coming out process of the lesbian or gay family member, but the family also faces its own adjustment process (Savin-Williams, R.C. & Dubé, E.M., 1998; LaSala, M., 2000, 2010).

In this study of the crisis and reorganization of the families, there are indications that siblings may also have an important unacknowledged role that has yet to be studied. Siblings are recognized as having a very special place in a person's life, and this relationship is the longest we experience. Unlike parent-child and romantic relationships, we evolve with our siblings from the cradle to the grave. In the coming out process, largely described as generating stress as well as family transformation (Green, R.J., 2000; LaSala, M., 2000, 2010), the sibling sub-system must be considered for its specific and unique features, in particular because the LGB person may find in his/her brothers and sisters specific interlocutors. Indeed, siblings share the same family, which is not the case for friends, while being of the same generation, which is not the case for parents. It is important to get a better understanding of the role that siblings may play in the family crisis and reorganization, as they are likely to help as well as to impede the family adjustment process.

A series of studies have shown that the suicide rate amongst sexual minority youths is two or three times higher than amongst heterosexual youths (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Marshal & al., 2011). In their book, Beck, Firdion, Legleye & Schiltz (2010) map out most of the studies dealing with the subject and relate that in New-Zealand, Australia, Guam, Japan, Turkey, Amerindians, and in several European countries, all the investigations have led to similar results: sexual minority youths present higher levels of suicide attempts. In Belgium, Van Heeringen and Vincke (2010) note a doubled risk for homosexuals and bisexuals youths, related to depression symptoms and unsatisfactory homosexual friendships.

Moreover, sexual minority youths are more inclined to use and abuse several substances, and show more eating disorders and depressive symptoms. In this context, positive relations, at school and within the family in particular, con-

²⁹ - Research is in a pilot phase and the results presented here are preliminary.

stitute high potential protective factors (D'Augelli, Grossman & al., 2005; Marshal & al., 2011; Baiocco & al., 2012).

So a link has been established between the quality of social and family support for homosexual youths and suicide and/or psychological symptoms risk. From this, it becomes clearer how important it is to study sibling relationship's quality in the coming-out context.

Several authors have showed the protective effect of siblings. Bank and Kahn (1975) and Cicirelli (1982) show that most of the siblings provide psychological support to each other throughout the life course. Similarly, in the longitudinal studies of Gass, Jenkins & Dunn (2007) and Feinberg, Sakuma, Hostetler & Mc Hale (2013), siblings are recognized to have a very special place in a person's life and to support and protect them. It has been demonstrated that sibling affection can serve as a moderating factor between stressful life events and psychological symptoms.

For this reason, the research presented in this paper aims to understand the impact of the sibling relationship on the coming-out process, and the potential resource that it could represent.

But the research is also about the impact of the coming-out process on the siblings, in terms of family dynamic as on a more personal level. A. Gottlieb (2005), one of the few authors to consider siblings in the LGB context, has collected and published stories of brothers and sisters of gays and lesbians. These siblings talk about the impact of their sibling's disclosure on the whole family system but also on themselves, as well as the questions that cross their mind, in a mirror effect, regarding sexuality or difference.

Most of the time, when the sibling system is studied, it is through the representation, the view of a single member, by the administration of a questionnaire. Fewer studies take the sibling sub-system as a research unit, choosing appropriate tools and methods and applying them to all members in order to collect data regarding a sibling *organization*.

One of the reasons why siblings are virtually non-existent in the study of LGB families is that they are perhaps considered as having the same reaction as the parents, which would be a terrible oversimplification. Although siblings may sometimes think and act as their parents do, in a mirror effect and/or out of loyalty, we will see in the present paper how siblings, most of the time have their own personal view and experience.

METHOD

Research questions

- How is coming out to siblings experienced by LGB persons?
- How is it experienced by the siblings of LGB persons?
- How is it different/similar to coming out to parents?
- What kind of impact does coming out have on the siblings' relationships?

Sample

25 gays and 19 lesbians aged 18 to 40 (Mean age=26.34 years, St. Dev.=d 5.07) and their siblings.

Participants were Belgian. They were recruited by the "word-of-mouth" method and have responded on a voluntary basis.

The average age for the coming-out (viewed as a process) to a member of the family is 19.54 years. Most of them had already told a friend.

The homosexual participants included 21 later born subjects, a pair of twins and 21 elders.

Instruments

After receiving informed consent, participants were asked to take part in a semi-structured interview which would involve the whole sibling group if possible, otherwise with available members. The framework was composed of ten questions encouraging narration on the following themes: coming-out process, announcement steps, sibling's role during the process, a comparison of coming out to parents and coming-out to siblings, and impact on siblings' relationships.

The interview also allowed observation of the sibling's dynamic through the interactions, the "ambiance"³⁰ and the contact between members.

The sibling groups were also asked to complete the ASRQ questionnaire (Stocker, Lanthier & Furman, 1997), in order to have their own appreciation of their relationships.

L'ASRQ (Stocker,C., Lanthier, R. & Furman,W., 1997) was kindly transmitted to us from Pr Furman, with his agreement for its French translation.

The questionnaire assesses qualitative features of sibling relationships in young adulthood and beyond. The ASRQ consists of 81 items spread over 14 scales. The items on the 14 scales are combined to form 3 higher-order factors: Warmth, Conflict, and Rivalry. We use unit weighting of items for the majority of the scales and factors, which results in factor scores that range from 1-5. The exception to this general scoring strategy is that the rivalry scales are scored as the absolute value of deviations from the mid-point of the scale. Scale and factor scores have shown high levels of internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and low correlations with measures of socially desirable responding (Stocker, Lanthier, & Furman, 1997).

Homosexual participants were asked to complete a different questionnaire for their relationship with each participating sibling, and each participating sibling was asked to complete a questionnaire regarding their relationship with their homosexual sibling.

³⁰ - Concept introduced by E. Dessoy (1997).

Data Analysis

Thematic data were processed according to the content analysis model of L. Bardin (2007). Interviews were analysed for the presence of themes that reoccurred in discourse.

Emergent themes are described, examples are used to illustrate these themes and issues are discussed.

Regarding the questionnaire, we have calculated separate scores for each scale. These scores are based on homosexual participants' answers on one hand and for their siblings' answers on the other hand, in order to compare any potential differences of perception, in particular concerning the acceptance, the similarity or the support.

Results

The disclosure

54.5%³¹ of the participants *came out to a sibling before coming out to a parent*.

The **later born** participants are more inclined to disclose to a sibling before disclosing to a parent. This suggests that later born participants tend to search for support and approval from their elders, as a first announcement step.

When disclosure is first made to a parent, in most of the cases (73%) the mother is chosen, which corresponds to the literature (LaSala, 2010; Green, 2012).

Coming-out to siblings versus coming-out to parents

Most of the participants relate an easier disclosure to siblings than to parents. How do they explain this fact?

1) Participants are emotionally and financially dependent on their parents, which induces a fear of being kicked out of the home. According to them, this fear is not present with siblings.

2) There is more fear of *judgement* with parents, such as more fear of disappointing them by not matching their expectations. Several participants relate the mourning that has to be done by their parents, mainly regarding the heterosexual marriage and parenthood. In this mourning process, some parents experience a "question phase", as if they wanted to "test" the choice of their child, or like an attempt to make them change their mind. Several participants relate that they were asked the question: "Are you sure?", a response they understand but is hard to hear.

This corresponds to what Savin-Williams (1998) described as an initial parental reaction to the disclosure.

Most of the homosexual participants relate that they didn't have this kind of fear or experience with their siblings, *except some later born participants towards their elders*.

It is therefore important to keep in mind that the fear of disappointing might also exist in the sibling relationship, especially for those born later. Indeed, as described by literature about siblings, the elder might represent a figure at the "interface" of the parental and the sibling sub-systems, in terms of identification for instance. Several authors have shown in their identification models that those born later, tend to make a combination between parents and elders (Adler, 1949; Toman, 1987).

3) Homosexual participants evoke a relational responsibility towards their parents. They mention a fear of hurting them and an uncomfortable feeling of generating guilt. Many of them have been asked questions like "What did I do wrong?" or "What have I missed?" This parental guilt is largely related to a stigmatisation of homosexuality, which leads to an experience of shame, but also to a fear for the child and their future.

All participants underline that the risk of guilt is not the same amongst siblings, which are not concerned in the same way.

31 - Percentages mentioned have no particular statistical validity in view of the size of the sample, but give an indication of proportion.

Sibling's relationships

In some contexts, siblings can reveal themselves as a major resource for LGB persons, especially in terms of reassurance, acceptance and support towards parents.

1) Reassurance.

Many participants, mostly those born later, asked a sibling to be present for the announcement to parents.

François: *"If Thomas would not have been in the room at that moment, I don't know if I would have disclosed to my parents, because without eye contact with him I would perhaps have just moved on. I'm not sure if, at that present time, I would have told them"*.

In this family, Thomas has done the most of the work; François told his parents about his sexual orientation and then went quickly to his room, while Thomas stayed with their parents and try to ease the tensions.

2) Acceptance.

Elders and later born seem to be a support for acceptance, in different ways.

* **Later born individuals** tend to disclose first to an elder who then participates to the parents' acceptance as well as to self-acceptance.

Elders might be asked by their later born siblings to play such a role towards parents, or might choose spontaneously to play it.

Elise: *"If she (elder sister) had not accepted me, it would have been terrible for me. I would have been disappointed and very insecure. I don't know if I could have told my parents, and I don't know if I would have accepted myself"*.

To her sister: *"And you have also helped them to accept me more easily"*.

In this example, it is clear that siblings might represent a major support in homosexual identity building.

However, this statement must be nuanced because the help that siblings might bring for the *parent's acceptance* is not automatically accompanied by help for *self-acceptance*.

Elders, as we have seen previously, might constitute an identification model for those born later. They are aware of it, especially if parents contribute by exhortations like "You are older, you must create a good example". This role model is likely to give to elders some expectations towards their younger siblings, expectations similar to the parents, and might lead to disappointment and rejection.

* Some **elders** disclose first to a sibling but many are afraid of disturbing their young brothers and sisters. This reservation of the elders towards those later born seem to be linked to several factors such as the age of the youngsters, their sense of protection, or the role model they play, notably at the request of parents.

In addition, M. LaSala (2010) evokes the parent's fear that the homosexuality of an elder influences some younger siblings to take their turn at being gay.

Some of the participants' parents have indeed specifically asked the elder not to tell the youngsters, for this reason. This fear of contagion could be previously known by elders who then would be more likely to disclose to a parent, asking the permission to tell their younger sibling.

Justin came out to his parents at 16 years old. His brother was 10 years old. Before coming out to his brother, Justin wanted to talk with his mother: *"I needed the agreement of my mother, he (his brother) was a child. I wanted to inform my mother of my desire to disclose to my brother; to see what she thought of that. Because it might disturb the family organisation"*.

In fact, Justin's brother was aware of his homosexuality, for having seen him by stealth with his boyfriend.

As a whole, when later born siblings have less possibility to have an impact on the parent's acceptance, they offer their own acceptance which emotionally moves and helps the elders.

3) The "go-between".

In the family "crisis" and the necessary adjustment, brothers and sisters may play a "go-between" role, which is not always very comfortable.

Elise has waited for her sister's return from holiday before coming out to their parents. Sophie knew it and was very anxious to get back, as she was afraid of the consequences of the disclosure on the family system.

Sophie: *"I was freaking out. I was on my way home when I received a message from my sister: « It's ok, I told our parents » (mother and step-father). According to the fact that my step-father is old and not very open-minded, I was afraid to get back and pick up the pieces. I still lived at my parent's house at this time"*.

In the end, it didn't go too badly, although Sophie had to ease the tensions, with their step-father in particular.

As we have seen previously in another family, Thomas has to some extent made the announcement for his brother. Given their parent's reaction and their difficulty with acceptance, Thomas proposed family therapy, which was accepted by the family and helped with the reorganization and adjustment process.

Laura has an elder brother, Lionel, who came out at 18 by sending a letter to his sister and parents, just before going on holidays. Laura remembers that when she came home, her parents gave her the letter and asked her if she was aware of her brother's homosexuality. She says: "*What was important to them was to know if I was part of the secret. When I said that I didn't know anything, they sent me away and talked together*". At this moment, Laura felt abandoned not only by her parents, but also by her brother who wasn't there "*You passed the buck to me*", says Laura to Lionel during the interview. She also relates some difficult moments for a period, when their father came to her room to complain and talk about the parental couple's disagreement regarding their son's homosexuality. She remembers: "*I was afraid that Lionel could hear him because he spoke loudly. At this time, I felt like an **emotional punching-ball**. Nobody spoke to the right person and I was in the middle*".

Her experience has led Laura to set up with her brother some focus group sessions for parents of LGB people. According to these testimonies, the sibling's fears of the shock and crisis generated by the announcement shouldn't be underestimated, nor should their feelings be ignored.

In my opinion, this underlines the importance of focus groups, not only for parents but also for siblings. If Laura had found such a group, it could have helped her. Instead of this, she found support in setting up a group for parents.

The ASRQ questionnaire

The average scores of the sample for the factors are (brought to 20): Warmth 12.74/20; Conflict 6.74/20; Rivalry 3.3/20. These scores suggest that the sibling relationships of participants are more characterized by warmth than by conflict, rivalry tending to take very little place, evident by their own comments alone.

It has to be noted that siblings have a perception slightly more important to the emotional support within the sibling sub-system, and a stronger feeling of maternal rivalry.

The Acceptance, a scale of great importance for our study, has the highest rate with an average of 15 out of 20. The items of this scale concern the level of acceptance for personality, life style and ideas. Each item asks for the homosexual participant's acceptance towards their siblings, such as the sibling's acceptance towards the homosexual participant.

This scale being significant in relation to the theme of the study, it must be considered that participants may have responded in a particularly positive way to the items evoking acceptance. It must also be considered that acceptance is simply good in this sample and/or that the sample, composed on a voluntary basis, is particularly acceptant. One more explanation is related to the fact that siblings have, in most of the cases, completed their questionnaires at the same time and in the same place. They could have feared that their siblings take a look at their questionnaires, and then have answered in a positive way.

Anyway and as a whole, the scores in the questionnaires tended to confirm the findings of the semi-structured interviews with participants.

In the next phase of the research, a statistical analysis will be carried out, an ANOVA with multiple regression. The ANOVA will permit a comparison of the homosexual participants' perceptions and those of their siblings, taking into account variables like gender and order of birth.

Discussion

Generally, the impact of the coming out process on their relationships was considered by siblings as void (unchanged situation) or as positive, in the origin of a closer relationship.

The fact that a few sibling groups mention having experienced a distance in their relationship might underline the sample selection. As said previously, participants were recruited on a voluntary basis. We could then suppose that siblings who agreed to participate were those who had quite a good experience of coming-out. Indeed, in certain sibling groups, when one or several members were absent from the interview, it was said that they were busy, abroad *or* not comfortable with the subject. Nonetheless, this has to be nuanced.

For most of the sibling groups, the main reason to take part of the study was a desire to *communicate and exchange on the theme*. They took the chance to open a dialogue and to ask some questions they had never dared to ask. The fact that it was neither usual nor spontaneous to speak about it within the sibling group was perceptible notably by some overuse of laughter, suggesting an uncomfortable situation.

Sometimes, humour helps to put words on a difficult subject in a more admissible way:

"I don't like faggots (laughs)", "I was afraid that you would try to seduce me". For other ones, it is by highlighting

a difference between their sibling and "the others" (homosexuals) that a difficulty is tangible: "Why do they do the Gay Pride? Why this public demonstration? They have no decency"; "I was afraid, I didn't want my brother to have a debauched life, it doesn't fit with him. And I was thinking 'If my brother is homosexual, he'll never lead this kind of life, he'll have his boyfriend and that's it'". In this way, some limits or even a certain homophobia are expressed more or less directly.

As we have seen above with Laura, there are focus groups for parents but siblings for their part are not taken into consideration. However, setting up focus groups for siblings could encourage and sustain a dialogue on various questions generated by the homosexuality and the coming-out of one or several members. By helping siblings to share their experiences and to take into account each other's feelings and point of view, this dialogue could constitute a major activating factor of siblings' resources.

According to siblings, closer ties after disclosure are linked to a greater complicity and more authenticity due to what siblings perceive as a vote of confidence when their LGB brother or sister speaks from their heart.

M. LaSala (2010) calls "sensitization" the first stage of the coming-out process within the family. During this period, the parents and the homosexual child experience a distance due to the fact that the child has discovered and accepted that they are different but are not ready yet to share it with their parents. The child thus hides their life in order to avoid all questions/confrontations. In the next stage, called "the discovery", parents and child come closer.

These steps identified in the family process could also take place in a sibling's process, with a distance followed by a closer relationship after disclosure. We must then try to have a better understanding of the coming out *process within the sibling group*, in terms of dynamics but also in terms of stages. The issue is about knowing if the steps experienced by siblings are similar to those experienced by the whole family or not. In the same way, it would be important to compare the process that takes place amongst siblings and the one that takes place with *friends* (Baiocco, 2012). It would also be interesting to get a deeper understanding of the sibling's impact on the individual process as well as the favourable contexts to develop positive sibling relationships.

As V. Mitchell (2008) noted: « *Coming out culminates, for many lesbian women, in positive self-regard and a comfortable, welcoming social network. For others, self-disclosure may be too dangerous; or important individuals, communities or institutions may fail to accept us or our relationships. (...) In these situations of chronic or recurrent distress, a family member's ability to affirm our lesbian self (through the mirroring function), to soothe the shamed or rejected lesbian self (through the idealizing function), and to stand side-by-side as a companion in life (through the twin ship function), may be essential to us for many years* ».

V. Mitchell then mentions the importance of the « family of choice » (Weston, 1991; Dewaele & al., 2011), a set of relationships that can be counted on to perform the self-functions, failing to find in blood-family members the needed support.

A question emerging of the foregoing is: might siblings be these family members that could sustain the self-functions of the LGB person? If so, what kind of family environment is the more conducive for developing such resources? Conversely, what leads gays and lesbians to search for that support outside the siblings' group, looking then for what we could call « siblings of choice »? These questions will guide a further step of the study.

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